

A HUTCHINSON POCKET SPECIAL

THE BATTLE OF FLANDERS

by

KENNETH
ADAM

of the "Star" and the "B.B.C."

A fully informed account of the
dramatic struggle in Holland and
Belgium. An inspiring record of
heroism unparalleled in history

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by

KENNETH ADAM

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FOREWORD

IN compiling the narrative of *Battle of Flanders* I have drawn on the authorized material issued from time to time by the Ministry of Information.

The accounts of the Naval Eye-Witnesses who were appointed by the Admiralty, and the news service established by the Air Ministry to supplement the more laconic official communiqués set a very high standard of accurate, vivid, and what is just as important for the lay public, of simple reporting, shorn of technicalities. And to say that they were good reporting is the highest tribute a working journalist can pay.

For the opinions expressed in the last chapter the author is alone responsible.

I am indebted to the Editor of the *Star* newspaper for permission to incorporate certain material from articles written in that paper.

KENNETH ADAM.

The Old House,
Harpenden.

June 13, 1940.

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CHAPTER I

ENTRY INTO BATTLE

"In our hearts of hearts believing,
Victory crowns the just,
And that braggarts must
Surely bite the dust
Press we to the field ungrieving,
In our heart of hearts believing,
Victory crowns the just."

THOMAS HARDY,
Poems of War and Patriotism.

It was in the small hours of Friday, May 10, 1940, that the Battle of Flanders really began. For it was then that Hitler, thumbing his long-prepared timetable, nodded to his captains, and let loose the "furor Teutonicus," the new and stupendous apparatus of his military machine, upon the Low Countries.

Shortly before 4.30 on that fateful morning the burghers of Amsterdam awoke to the ominous hum of massed aeroplanes overhead and to the intermittent bark of ground guns, and knew that the thing which they had dreaded, had happened at last.

"It has come," they said.

Two hours later the early-rising workers of Brussels heard the same sounds, the drone of bombers at a great height, the whine and crash of bombs, and the reply of the anti-aircraft guns. For them it was an even more tragic awakening, not from the long, untroubled peace of centuries which had been Holland's good fortune, but from a brief, uneasy, quarter-century's respite from invasion. In that agonized moment of listening they knew that for the second time in 26 years Germany had broken her pledged word. The non-aggression pact was just another 'scrap of paper.'

"It has come," they said, "again."

With the bombing of these two capitals, and the almost simultaneous crossing of the frontiers by the advance guard of the Nazi hordes, the much-heralded, long-awaited Blitzkrieg had started. Back in Berlin the corps

of foreign correspondents were hastily summoned to meet Von Ribbentrop. Pale, sleepless, husky-voiced, he came straight to the Wilhelmstrasse from hectoring the Belgian Ambassador, the Netherlands Minister and the Luxembourg Chargé d'Affaires in an interview which had lasted most of the night.

To the assembled newspapermen he told a familiar story and one which no longer carried any conviction outside Germany itself: Britain and France having planned an attack on the Ruhr valley through Holland and Belgium, it was necessary for the Reich to take over the "protection and neutrality" of these countries and Luxembourg.

Meanwhile, the invaded countries, knowing full well that German "protection" spelled starvation and slavery for all those peoples unfortunate enough to come beneath it, had decided to resist.

Queen Wilhelmina issued a "flaming protest" and declared Holland at war with Germany. King Leopold put himself at the head of his troops, and swore: "I will be faithful to my oath." Both monarchs appealed for Allied help, and the reply was instantaneous.

The British Expeditionary Force on the Franco-Belgian border had been making ready for months for this "zero-hour." Intricate timetables for the movement of troops across Flanders had been drawn up, checked and revised long in advance so that the aggressor, having chosen his moment, should reap as little benefit as possible from his surprise. The exact schedule of each unit was known, and timed, so as to avoid crowding and maintain a maximum speed of progress.

A code-word on the telephone was enough to set the machinery in motion.

Military police and sappers were the first across the border. Belgian Customs Officers joined in the cheers which greeted them, and helped the sappers in their first task of uprooting the steel poles, painted red-and-white, which marked the boundary.

On the heels of the motor-cycles and lorries which carried the police and the engineers, came the tanks. In some cases both light and heavy tanks began moving

across even before the posts were removed. After them rolled anti-tank trucks, carrying light guns and heavy howitzers, and thousands of lorries laden with troops.

Most of the tanks had a nickname, usually that of a racehorse, painted on their sides. One had the historic title, "Old Bill." Officers sat in the open turrets, scanning maps. The troop-carrying lorries had anti-aircraft guns mounted, but there were few German bombers to be seen. Overhead British fighters kept watch.

The men, not one of whom was afoot, in striking contrast to the Expeditionary Force of 1914, which slogged its way through Flanders under its own motive power, were in the highest spirits. They sang, as they rode to war, the songs with which they had whiled away the long months of waiting. Peasants by the roadside heard for the first time the strains of "Run, Rabbit, Run," and "The Quartermaster's Stores."

The Belgian welcome was fervent in its enthusiasm. Girls strewed the ground over which the machines rumbled, with lilac and laburnum blossom. Tommies shouted: "Which way, Berlin?" and pointed to their chalked signs: "Berlin or Bust," and "Now for Hitler." Whenever they stopped, there were kisses and mugs of beer in plenty for them, and as they moved off, the British exchanged with the Belgians the old "Thumbs Up" sign which did such cheerful duty in the last war, and which the people of Flanders have never forgotten.

The amount of material moved into Belgium on the first day astonished observers. Huge quantities of it had lain hidden in copses and thickets on the French side for months past. So rapid, too, was the advance across the broad plains, along the dusty highways and over the cobbled streets, that the Belgians in many cases were taken completely by surprise. Children, playing in the path of the lumbering tanks, had to be snatched to safety, and then, released, would run beside the fast-moving column, uttering shrill cries of encouragement until their breath and legs failed them.

By late afternoon the movement had assumed the precision of a peacetime manœuvre. Control officers sat

at tables in the open-air by cross-roads. Despatch-riders came and went. Mechanical breakdowns were virtually non-existent. Bren guns were set up at vital points. British military police took charge of all traffic. When night fell, dimmed lamps set by the roadside enabled the long lines of men and steel to keep on the move.

And so, while to the north the Dutch defended the banks of the Yssel and to the east the Belgians put up a stubborn resistance on the Albert Canal, the British Expeditionary Force passed to their aid through towns and villages of Flanders whose names were already part of our history. It was an advance on oiled wheels.

Over the week-end of May 11-12 it became obvious that, although the remarkable speed of the British advance towards the front was being well maintained, and the stream of men and machines along parallel roads was still unceasing, two factors tending to hamper and hinder the movement had henceforth to be reckoned with.

The first was the German bombing force, which extended its activities from the front itself, and from our air bases, to the roads and points of communication along the routes of the Allied advance through Belgium. Bridges, level crossings and road junctions were heavily bombed. The mechanized columns themselves were machine-gunned from the air.

The second was the rapidly swelling procession of Belgian refugees from the eastern part of the country, in cars, on cycles, on foot, in carts, a pathetic cavalcade of old men and women with babies, of the sick and the infirm, fleeing, many of them for the second time in their lives, before the insensate fury of the invader, and carrying with them such of their belongings as they had been able to salvage before their hurried departure.

Wherever these pitiful columns were encountered on the narrow roads of central Belgium, delay was inevitable. Sometimes the breakdown of the improvised transport was complete, and a road would be blocked for hours on end.

What made matters worse was the clear indication that not all these breakdowns were genuine; even among the distressed and toiling refugees seeking safety, the Quislings and fifth columnists were active.

Monday, May 13, should have been a Bank Holiday in England but was not. The new spirit of determination which had swept the country with the incoming of Churchill and the news from the Low Countries, made the very idea of pleasure-seeking hateful. In Flanders, the day saw the B.E.F. on the threshold of a great battle. The Belgian people were still flocking to the roadsides to cheer our army and throw roses in its path. The Tommies were still singing on their way. But every hour saw them nearer to the enemy.

Every hour news came to British G.H.Q. of the immense weight of the German thrust, of the tremendous mass of armour which was being hurled at the Albert Canal and of the reckless squandering of life and limb which had already enabled the enemy to capture bridges at Maastricht, at the vital junction of the Canal and the River Meuse. The German strategy was patent by this time; to break through the Albert Canal line, the only really strong defence position which the Belgian army had, and strike, if possible, at the critical point where the armies of the Allies met.

Old soldiers, reading the news on this day, recalled the Easter week of 1918, when a big push in front of St. Quentin strove to split the English forces on the right where they joined hands with the French on the left, a push which only exhausted itself just outside Amiens. The intention was the same. Would it be more successful this time, or less? If the present mobility were maintained, an answer would not be long in coming.

While the Allied force, for by this time there were French as well as British divisions on the march, was pressing forward to Brussels, with scarcely a look, so eye-witnesses declared, at the aerial combats which by this time were going on almost continuously over their heads, the Air Component, that part of the R.A.F. under the command of Lord Gort, was doing magnificent work. Over 100 enemy planes were brought down in two days,

and the vigil of British fighters was kept up by day and by night.

At the end of the fourth day of the move into Flanders, almost every man and every gun which we had had on the Belgian frontier had been transported. The normal B.E.F. front line was deserted. Where for months there had been the bustle and regulated activity of an army, was silence. Once-fortified positions were empty of all inhabitants. Rats and rooks and other marauders made their raids unhindered.

When Allied help reached Brussels, it was to find the city singularly unperturbed by the advance of the enemy to its very gates. It takes time for a civilian population to accommodate itself to a state of war, even when there is a constant risk of air-raids. People still sat at their accustomed tables outside the cafés on the boulevards. Shops were open and doing an almost normal business. Trams clanged their way through the city. Taxis plied for hire. Yet only a few miles to the east now the battle raged.

British infantry on the last stage of their journey to the Front moved in long convoys of buses which only a few months ago had been taking Londoners out into the country and to the sea-side. They were the modern counterpart of those historic old two-deckers in which their fathers and elder brothers had gone to the Front in 1914. In front of them mechanized British cavalry were already in touch with the enemy in the preliminary stage of the great battle for Brussels.

German bombers increased their attacks over the area occupied by the British, sweeping low over the streets of towns and villages, and loosing their bombs anywhere and everywhere in an attempt to block the roads. The "cavalry" had to make their way over the scattered debris of defenceless homes. Beds and furniture and heaps of miscellaneous wreckage lay across the roads and pavements.

The surrender of Holland on the 14th, due in part to the failure of the water defences and in part to the devastating moral effect of repeated attacks from the air, and as much as anything to widespread internal

treachery, meant that the full fury of the German attack could be concentrated further south. The threat to the Belgian capital at once became more imminent, and the Battle of Brussels began with the pounding of the historic city of Louvain, fifteen miles away, by new artillery with barrels forty feet long. British batteries returned the fire, smashing many German columns which were attempting to punch a path towards Brussels.

Fighting on a front of a hundred miles, from the marshes near the Albert Canal to the French mining basin of Longwy, was thus mounting in intensity. The German break-through at the angle of the Canal and the Meuse became hourly a more serious matter.

The nature of the German technique in this new war of movement was now fully revealed. It was recognized as a development of that already practised successfully in Poland. Low-flying aircraft and tanks were being used in combination to smash a gap in the Allied lines, and these were followed in quick succession by columns of more lightly armoured fighting vehicles, and by infantry in lorries, who filled the gap and spread out fanwise on the further side of it.

Once the gap had been established, the German dive bombers moved forward to direct the full force of their loads upon Allied troops attempting to close the gap. In all this the German forces as a whole were aided by the weather. The sun shone brilliantly out of a cloudless sky for day after day. Not only were the conditions thus perfect for bombing attacks, but the countryside was being baked so hard that even if they had to leave the highways the tanks and armoured cars did not find their advance appreciably slowed down.

It was to the south again of the B.E.F. positions that the German drive was most menacing. Down the valley of the Meuse from Liège the tanks, including a new type which had not hitherto been seen in action, and the armoured cars thundered at great speed, making light even of the heavily wooded country of the Ardennes. Namur, with its ancient citadel, and Dinant, standing up almost perpendicularly on the river bank, once again

came into the news, and what was thought at first to be a mere diversion proved to be the major onslaught.

By the middle of the week the British forces east of Brussels were being heavily engaged and were standing firm against serious German attacks. Fighting was fiercest in Louvain itself and in the outskirts. At one point the German troops, driving forward in their armoured strength, succeeded momentarily in slicing through the British lines and entering a part of the city. The German shock troops fought their way along the streets from the railway station, and then threw up barricades. Skirmishes went on throughout a whole day and night, and there was a good deal of sniping from buildings on both sides. Then the B.E.F. counter-attacked, and succeeded in driving the Germans out of the city.

Correspondents, allowed to visit Louvain, described how its beauty had once again been shattered, more it seemed by shelling than from bombs, how dead and desolate were the streets, and how admirably calm the little knots of British soldiers sitting and lying by their Bren guns, smoking cigarette after cigarette to pass the time till the next attack came.

Behind the town itself it was a sad and ruined scene. Refugees trudged painfully on through the heat of the day. By the side of the road wooden farmhouses and cottages which had been set alight by incendiary bombs still smouldered, and the air was filled with acrid smoke.

The French military spokesman in Paris on May 16 spoke of the campaign as having developed into a "great hurricane," in which men and tanks and guns were almost inextricably mingled. The whole front now, from Walcheren in the north to Longwy in the south was ablaze. The great assault in the south, where the enemy had succeeded in crossing the Meuse with armoured columns assumed grave proportions, but on their own front the British troops, now fighting not far from Waterloo, continued to stand undaunted and unshaken, and to repulse all the attacks made upon them.

British and German infantry came to really close grips for the first time in the ruins of the railway station at

Louvain. There was sharp bayonet fighting, in which our men proved to be more than a match for the Germans. Louvain, wrecked and empty, was still in our hands, and so were the ridges behind. To the north of the city there was more close fighting in the villages. Attack and counter attack succeeded each other at short intervals, and the blue sky was full of the black puffs of shrapnel.

The first phase of the B.E.F.'s action, in which the mechanized cavalry had been principally employed was now past. It was an infantry battle, and the "cavalry" retired to scour the country for parachutists. Our reinforcements were still being hampered by the thick columns of civilian refugees. Brussels was hearing the guns.

From his headquarters King Leopold saluted the defenders of Liège, who were still standing out in the forts and commanded them to "resist to the end." "I am proud of you," he said.

The following days brought severe shocks to the Allied cause. Mr. Churchill, who had flown to Paris for consultation with M. Reynaud, described the operations in the south, where the Germans had broken through, as the "Battle of the Bulge." That gave the public at home some indication of the seriousness of the position. Hitherto the German penetration had been regarded as a dent only. The word "bulge" had an ominous sound.

But it was not until it was learned that the B.E.F. had had to retire, through no weakness of theirs, west of Brussels, in order that the line should be kept straight, that the full gravity of the position was realized. This retirement by the B.E.F. meant that the Eastern half of Belgium had to be regarded as lost. Moreover, the swift and forceful advance of the Germans through a wide sector of the French prepared positions in the south—not the Maginot Line but a line of forts and pill boxes with anti-tank obstacles, built since last September—was a source of increasing anxiety to General Gamelin. He issued a stirring Order of the Day:

"Any soldier who cannot advance should allow himself to be killed rather than abandon that part of our

soil which has been entrusted to him. As always in the grave hours of our history, the order to-day is 'Conquer or die!' We must conquer."

In Flanders, where our troops had taken up their new positions without any disorder, the battle continued, but the emphasis for the next few days lay almost entirely in the south. The alarm and confusion which the Germans had created in the open country of the Meuse with their armoured vehicles enabled the infantry to pour in in large numbers, despite the tireless efforts of the R.A.F. and the Armée de l'Air to prevent their making headway.

Mr. Churchill, making his first broadcast as Prime Minister on the evening of Sunday, May 19, reminded his listeners that solemn as the moment was it would be foolish to lose heart and courage, for although fighting was going on behind our front the French were also at many points active behind the German lines. Both sides, therefore, were in an extremely dangerous position. Mr. Churchill emphasized the necessity of casting away all idea of resisting attack behind concrete lines or natural obstacles. Only by "furious unrelenting attack" could mastery be regained.

M. Reynaud, almost at the very time that Mr. Churchill was speaking, was making changes in conformity with this new situation. He himself took over the Ministry of War from M. Daladier, who for all his excellent qualities had placed too much faith in the frontier defences. General Gamelin, who was presumably considered responsible for the German breakthrough on the Meuse, because he had entrusted the defences of the river to a few divisions which were neither so well-officered nor trained as those who had marched into Belgium, was relieved of his post.

In his place General Weygand, Commander-in-Chief of the French Army in the Near East, became Generalissimo in all theatres of war. This was an appointment which had a heartening effect in both countries, for both knew him as the General who had never been defeated; as the faithful collaborator of

Foch, and the brilliant executor of his plans, of whom Foch himself once said: "Weygand, c'est moi."

The beginning of the third week in May saw the German offensive on the Meuse turned westward and the French resistance hardest pressed south-east of St. Quentin. It seemed as if the French were adapting themselves quickly to this "moving battle," as if their genius for improvisation would enable them to stabilize the front so that the qualities of the French and British soldiers might be quickly matched with those of the Germans. The ordinary French 75 millimetre gun, of which there were enormous quantities available, since the French Army has never neglected its artillery, was being brought up in large numbers, and was providing a formidable obstacle. Tanks, too, of thirty and seventy tons, were being hurried forward. Indeed, the fantastic nature of this struggle between tanks, which charged each other at point-blank range, seemed to belong to a Wellsian romance rather than to reality.

Nothing was clearer than that the Nazi machine was being pressed onward regardless of loss, in a desperate attempt to split the Allied armies in two. The German armoured vehicles ground their way over masses of their own dead. The German infantry was thrown again and again into battle despite the enormous losses which they suffered. The German bombers came over in wave after wave, although on almost every occasion a very heavy toll was taken of them. The daring of the German offensive was undoubted. They risked the cutting of ever-lengthening lines of communication as they drove towards the sea, and they were so willing to sacrifice everything for extreme mobility that their infantry, for instance, rushed to the attack with their light machine guns, carrying no packs, no overcoats, no respirators, and even without steel helmets.

Meanwhile, as the German penetration became deeper it was necessary for the B.E.F. to conform to the salient by continuing to retreat. Though their determination was unshaken they had no alternative but to give way. Once again the greater part of little Belgium lay under the heel of the invader. The Government had already

retreated to Ostend, and the Minister of the Interior in a broadcast spoke of a situation "reminiscent of the first weeks of 1914." The Belgian broadcasting system continued to function in a gallant but limited fashion, and it wrung the hearts of many thousands of Belgian people, to hear that the gramophone record of "La Brabançonne" which was played several times every day was growing cracked and worn.

The comparative quiescence of the Flanders front was rudely shattered when the Germans in their north-western drive occupied Arras and Amiens and even claimed Abbeville. This occupation was by a few thousand men only. It was, none the less, extremely disquieting. Briefly, the two main Allied armies were now cut in two. Two of the most important railway junctions in Northern France had fallen to the spearhead of the German advance, and the German mechanized units were many of them now able to refuel in the cities through which they were passing instead of relying on the meagre communications which they had with their bases.

Militarily, this further breach in the Front was only a continuation of an enemy movement already well established, and therefore already causing the Allied Staffs the maximum anxiety. Indeed, the position, if it could be retrieved at once, could be said to have become more dangerous for the enemy, whose contacts with his main body were growing more slender with every mile that he advanced, than for the Allies.

Psychologically, it was the biggest blow of the whole campaign. The Battle of the Bulge had become the Battle for the Ports. The incredible had happened, and the Armies had been separated. The Channel Ports which had been denied Germany last time for four desperate years, seemed likely this time to fall into her hands like ripe plums less than a month after the "real war" had begun. The night that Arras and Amiens fell was the night that Reynaud cried to the Senate:

"The country is in danger . . . There have been incredible mistakes . . . Let us rise to the misfor-

tune of the country . . . If I were told to-morrow that only a miracle could save France, I would reply, 'I believe in miracles because I believe in France.'"

And the B.E.F., which had started out so bravely less than a fortnight before had perforce to fall back and back, in some cases even to those very positions on the Franco-Belgian Frontier which it had abandoned and never thought to see again.

The German advance guard which was thus piercing the very heart of France had, in its headlong rush towards the coast, skirted Cambrai whither the B.E.F. had turned in some strength. Several mechanized divisions of the enemy were hard on the heels of their more lightly armoured forerunners. These were thrown against the British forces north of the town. Here a fierce battle ensued. Although we were soon greatly outnumbered our resistance was magnificently maintained.

The time of endurance, of weariness, of hardship and the extremity of danger had begun. Grave as their position was, and they themselves cannot have been in doubt about that, the morale of the men of the B.E.F. was high. To a man they were fighting, and ready to go on fighting, with dogged courage, and at G.H.Q. Lord Gort, their Commander, was filled with an inspiring energy which would not admit the thought of defeat. Never for one moment did the threat of encirclement cause them to lose heart.

One story of the valiant behaviour of some men of the Auxiliary Military Pioneer Corps, better known as the "Amps," is typical of many. These men were veterans from the last war, and considered too old to take part in the day-to-day fighting. Their chief duties were with pick and shovel, clearing roads which had been blocked by bombs behind the lines.

On one occasion a party of these men, while carrying out their daily duties came into contact with the enemy. Two German tanks which had pushed on ahead of the rest stopped to try to refuel at a petrol station. Creeping up from behind, the Amps attacked the caterpillar wheels with their picks, and then proceeded to lay about

them to such purpose that several members of the tank crews were killed and the rest surrendered.

On another occasion some of these men were taking a lift back to their base in an ancient lorry laden with refugees, when two Heinkels appeared, and coming down to within a few hundred feet of the road, opened fire with their machine guns on the women and children and old people who made up the bulk of the passengers. With astonishing speed for men of their years the Amps jumped out, dragging the refugees with them, and they all took refuge in the ditch. The Amps lay over the bodies of the children in order to protect them from bullets. One of the Amps was killed, but the child lived to continue on its way to safety, after the German bombers had passed on.

The heroism of these older men was well matched by that of the young and hitherto untried army. The full tale has yet to be told, if indeed it is ever told, of the individual feats of gallantry which were performed in these days of hard and remorseless fighting. Just as the B.E.F. in its first advance to the aid of the Belgian Army had shown a splendid and almost clockwork efficiency, so in the days of stout resistance east of Brussels and in the dourer days of the running fight from Brussels to the River Scheldt, did its stubborn resistance do credit to all ranks and to the annals of the British Army.

At the time when the German mechanized and motorized units were breaking through into the coastal districts beyond Abbeville towards Calais, there were various possible lines of development. Though the Flanders position was grave, and became more so as each enemy tank or lorry passed through the gap, it was not irreparable. For one thing, Arras was recaptured and the road to Bapaume opened, so that the gap between the northern forces and the main French Army, now lined up along the Somme and the Aisne, was definitely narrowed. If the line of the Scheldt, that is roughly from Ghent through Oudenarde to Tournai could be maintained, although at this time it was fiercely assailed, there was still the chance that the Germans

would be denied the Belgian coast, that the gap might be closed altogether and that the isolated units in the coastal district might be mopped up altogether.

If, however, the line of the Scheldt was forced, there was still another shorter and easier line to hold, which would pass from Dunkirk through Lille, Cambrai, St. Quentin and Laon. Here again, of course, everything depended on whether the gap could be closed.

The third and worst contingency that the Allies had to contemplate at this moment was stabilization only on the line of the Somme and the Aisne. That meant, as far as could be foreseen, the loss of the Flanders Armies, and certainly of the French Channel ports.

With the B.E.F. at bay, anything was possible, especially as the R.A.F. continued its heroic and tireless exploits on all fronts. But the decision unhappily did not lie in the hands and in the valour of our forces, either on land or in the air. Things did become worse indeed, as first Boulogne and then Calais were known to be scenes of desperate fighting, but still the bare possibility of reopening communications with Amiens and the main French Armies remained. And not once but many times in the history of the British Army has a bare possibility proved sufficient to turn a desperate situation into ultimate victory. The final blow, however, came not from the Germans but from our own ally in the north.

When shortly before dawn on Tuesday, May 28, the King of the Belgians, against the unanimous advice of his Ministers, insisted on sending a plenipotentiary to the German lines, suing for peace, and thus deserting the Allies to whom less than three weeks before he had appealed desperately for assistance, he exposed our whole flank and laid open the road to Dunkirk.

The best army which Belgium had ever possessed, nearly half a million strong, was without any warning to the British and French Commands ordered to show the white flag.

It seemed then as if Great Britain were about to suffer a military disaster of vaster dimensions than any in her long history.

CHAPTER II

THE MAGNIFICENT RETREAT

"No thought of flight,
None of retreat, no unbecoming deed that argued fear;
Each on himself relied as only in his arm the moment lay
Of victory."

MILTON, *Paradise Lost*.

KING LEOPOLD'S surrender was the end of a phase. By that momentous Tuesday, eighteen days had passed since the campaign began, and in that short space of time the B.E.F. had already proved itself a worthy successor to the armies of the past. It had not failed in any way. It had fought bravely and dourly. It had been equal to all the demands made upon it.

When, with certain French divisions in support, it moved forward into Belgium, it had taken up positions which had been arranged beforehand, and which were intended as a second line of defence if, as seemed likely, the Belgian first line along the Albert Canal and the Meuse was unable to hold the Germans up until the Allies could reach it. The German advance had proved to be much more rapid than had been believed possible, and, the B.E.F., in its lines east of Brussels from Louvain to Wavre, had borne the full fury of Nazi tanks and bombers stoutly and with unflinching gallantry. Sometimes ground was lost for a time when the German pressure was especially heavy, but it was almost always regained in fierce counter-attacks.

Unfortunately, as all the world now knows, the French in the south had failed to withstand an onslaught which was, if anything, even heavier than those directed against the B.E.F., and desperate readjustments had to be made.

The difficulties attending the withdrawal were almost unbelievable, for the whole area was swarming with refugees. Nevertheless our long mechanized columns, although continuously bombed from the air, had successfully extricated themselves, and our rearguard had fought delaying actions which showed that the spirit of

Mons still lived. Any question, any doubt which might have existed in the minds of our military leaders as to whether the new army was equal in skill and in staying power to the Navy and the Air Force, which had already been tried and proven, were set at rest.

Having established itself on the river Scheldt from Oudenarde down to the French frontier, the B.E.F. had once again repulsed all pressure. To the south of us, however, the gap was still open. Through it the Germans had poured in ever-increasing numbers until our communications were cut, and our flank and rear exposed. Even so, the B.E.F. continued to contest every step of the way, and was even able to deliver a heavy counter-blow near Arras. Though our mechanized forces were not strong enough to cut their way through the gap to the south, they did succeed in checking the German encirclement, and all efforts to pierce our lines had proved unavailing.

A senior serving officer, just returned from the battle front, broadcast to the nation a thrilling account of the way in which the B.E.F. was fighting. "I can only marvel at the tough and gallant efficiency with which my dead-tired troops carried out their job," he said. "On one day alone we shot down eleven German bombers with Bren gun fire from the ground."

A great feat of arms, therefore, had already been accomplished when the further shattering blow of the surrender of nearly half a million Belgians in the north came like a thunderbolt. Nothing which the B.E.F. had had to do in the first eighteen days of the campaign was equal to the demands now made upon it.

The outcry against the Belgian King was fierce and bitter, at first in France, where M. Reynaud described it as "an action without precedent in history," and a Paris newspaper tersely summed up the history of Belgium in the last twenty-five years in a single sentence, "*Après le Roi Chevalier, le Roi Félon.*" Then, after the first shock of surprise, Britain, the Empire and the Americas revealed mingled sentiments of anger, scorn, and pity.

To the Allied leaders, both military and political, it

was perhaps not so completely unexpected. Though all allowances had been made for the young monarch, whose personal history was such a tragic one, it had not gone unremarked that for years his actions, in both domestic and in foreign policy, had shown a leaning towards the totalitarian states. The influence of Italy, to whose Royal Family he was connected by marriage, had been most noticeable.

Even when, having appealed for the help of Britain and France, he became one of our Allies, his actions were strange and unaccountable in one whose only hope of salvation for himself and his country lay in the fullest possible co-operation with London and Paris. He was unwilling for his Ministers to make personal contacts with the French. He would not condemn the invaders on the radio, as the Government wished him to. He would not present himself to his Parliament before assuming the leadership of the Army.

When the full tide of battle swept across his country he declined to follow the advice of General Weygand. The position which he insisted on maintaining close to the front line, and which seemed outwardly to emphasise his personal determination to fight with his gallant Army, was seen rather to be a convenient spot from which his plenipotentiary could be despatched to sue for peace from the German High Command. And so the unworthy son of a great father retired to his palace at Laeken, which the Nazis with mocking graciousness permitted him to hold, at the very heart of the country which he had betrayed.

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The B.E.F. had no time for recriminations. It was fighting for its life. The first news of the Belgian surrender reached the rank-and-file of our Forces as a rumour. To begin with they did not believe it. Owing to the efforts of Fifth Columnists much damage had been done by rumour already and the B.E.F. had learned to be wary. But the troops in the north soon realized that it was the truth.

Late in the morning of the 28th, heavy firing came from the direction of what they still believed to be the

Belgian lines, and they knew then that it was the Germans who were there. They had to wheel round and turn their guns behind them. They were fighting in a circle.

The slim line on the Yser, from a point near Ypres down to the river Scarpe, which bent back in a salient from Mieppe and through Cassell, to the Channel ports, could be held no longer. Through the sullen ranks of the Belgian Army, which by Leopold's order had lined up along the sides of the roads, prominently displaying the white flag, the German Armies were allowed to pass. So the front from Ypres to the sea, east of Dunkirk, became an enemy and offensive front, instead of an Allied and defensive one.

With Boulogne already, and Ostend soon to be, in enemy hands, and Calais the scene of a fierce battle, only Dunkirk, of the vital Channel ports, remained to us either as inlet or outlet. Withdrawal by sea through that port was seen to be the only course open to General Blanchard and Lord Gort. Attacks upon it from the air, however, were incessant. Even evacuation, at any rate of the main body, seemed the slenderest of hopes.

Late on the night of the 28th it seemed as though nothing could prevent the Germans from closing in and completing the circumference of the circle which would entirely trap the B.E.F. Mr. Duff Cooper, once more rallying the nation in a broadcast both frank and courageous, said:

"It will not be a defeated Army that we will withdraw. It will be an Army whose courage is still high and in which every officer and man is still burning with desire to meet the enemy in combat."

At the same time, there was no tendency on the part of the Government to minimize the extreme jeopardy of the B.E.F., and the British public was prepared for the possibility of grievous casualties. A silent and anxious House of Commons listened to a short statement from the Prime Minister:

"The situation of the British and French Armies now engaged in a most severe battle and beset on three sides and from the air is evidently extremely grave. The surrender of the Belgian Army adds

appreciably to their grievous peril. But the troops are in good heart and are fighting with the utmost discipline and tenacity.

"The House should prepare itself for hard and heavy tidings. I have only to add that nothing which may happen in this battle can in any way relieve us of our duty to defend the world cause to which we have vowed ourselves.

"Nor should it destroy our confidence in our power to make our way, as on former occasions in our history, through disaster and grief to the ultimate defeat of our enemies."

That was all, at this time, that Mr. Churchill was able to say. A heavy-hearted nation hoped for the best, but braced itself for the worst.

In the next forty-eight hours the two beleaguered Armies—for the French, under General Prioux, were fighting a rearguard action in and around Lille, which in its staunchness and discipline recalled the epic of Verdun—were the centre of the fiercest imaginable *melée*. The British line which had run along the banks of the Yser and the Yser Canal, and across the unforgettable battleground of Ypres, had to be contracted to meet the new menace from the north.

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In the areas from which the B.E.F. was withdrawing, thousands of women and children refugees were caught, and the savagery with which the advancing Nazi hordes mowed down these fleeing multitudes with machine guns, roused our men to a pitch of fury.

Surrender brought no safety to these hapless people. Though in the villages white flags were hung like bunting across the streets, the Nazis drove the people out of their homes and murdered them.

The devastation of the towns and villages of Flanders which had taken weeks and months in the last War, was now repeated in a few hours. Quiet, peaceful little towns, full of cafés, hotels and simple gaiety, were reduced to piles of rubble. Very often when our men left, there was **not a wall above two feet still standing**. Under the rain of bombs the buildings collapsed like packs of cards.

Evelyn Montague of the *Manchester Guardian*, son of C. E. Montague, who was one of the most famous war correspondents of the war of 1914-18, vividly described these air raids, the dangers of which he and the other correspondents with the B.E.F. shared before they were evacuated. He wrote of: "the bright betraying moon over the sleeping town, the urgent wailing of the sirens, the faint drone overhead as the long fingers of the search-lights probed the sky. Sometimes there came a thunderous crash of a bomb, shaking the building, sometimes the flowering of a red light among the houses, like a many-picked dahlia. The lights would search patiently sweeping across and across the sky, and sometimes they would suddenly swing together on to a grey moth, caught in the glow, and then there would come a raging burst of sound, the lighter guns chattering like demented typewriters, the heavy ones banging away with a series of smacking crashes and leaping flares of flame, while the red and white stars of tracer shells poured upwards in a torrent of rushing light."

In spite of the intensity of such bombardment from the air; in spite of a fortnight's continuous marching and fighting with little or no sleep; in spite of the apparently irresistible advance of the tanks, and the noise of incessant gun-fire which caused thousands of our men to suffer temporary deafness; in spite of hurried meals of bully beef and biscuits; in spite of the knowledge that they were almost certainly trapped, "the spirit and conduct of all concerned"—to quote an official communiqué—"were beyond all praise." Nothing could shake their cheerfulness under the most desperate conditions. There was no limit to their cool courage.

Crack regiments of the Guards fought side by side with "week-end" soldiers, and the spirit and discipline never varied. The line on the Yser remained intact. Behind the confused battleground, the British and French Navies lent powerful support. Admiral Abrial, with a large number of ships under his command, rapidly transformed Dunkirk into an entrenched camp. On May 30 the Germans threw forty more infantry divisions, in all probably three-quarters of a million

men, and virtually all their armoured units, into the struggle. No loss of life seemed to matter to the German High Command if their objective could be reached.

There was no time for either side to throw up entrenchments. Fighting was open, often hand to hand, and bloody almost beyond belief. As close masses of the German infantry came at our men they were mown down by machine-guns, until the British guns were red-hot, and the famous hills of Flanders were piled high with corpses. One of the B.E.F. was later to describe it in a homely but telling metaphor: "They came at us," he said, "like a football crowd coming out of the Arsenal. There was no cohesion, no definite plan. Just a huge mass of men rushing pell mell into our bullets."

The German shock troops were all big fellows, wearing armour-plated waistcoats and carrying nothing but a tommy-gun, with spare ammunition hanging on to their belts. The infantry, who followed them, were quite different. Many of them were mere children. But even the shock troops ran when the Guards advanced with their bayonets.

The Guards, indeed, often with nothing but their bayonets, their ammunition exhausted—men and cold steel against a blinding hail of bullets—performed almost unbelievable feats of valour. The Cameron Highlanders too, added mightily to their fine traditions by holding certain villages while battalions of other troops withdrew through the streets. In doorways and at street corners the "Jocks" waited with their bayonets at the ready, and whenever the Germans approached they charged, driving the enemy back again and again.

The Surrey Yeomanry, one of the first of the Territorial units to be sent to France in 1914, also earned new glory for itself. A mechanized detachment found itself cut off by two divisions of German tanks, during the withdrawal. The Surrey men formed their guns into a square, and set about the enemy to such purpose that tanks and crews alike were completely destroyed.

In the retreat, the heavier guns more often than not had to be left behind. Men of the Royal Artillery took up rifles and bayonets, and fought like seasoned infantry-

men. One batch of a hundred heroes held a position against vastly larger and better equipped German forces for more than twenty-four hours. Then, when units of an Irish regiment arrived to support them, they charged side by side with bayonets, and drove the Germans back a considerable distance.

In addition to the acute embarrassment caused by the refugees, the retreating Armies had to contend with Fifth Columnists behind their own lines. In one village, British troops entering at one end saw a civilian motor car drive in at the other, approach refugees pouring down the main street, open fire with a machine-gun, and drive off again. In another village, which was the headquarters of a Scottish regiment, the Fifth Columnists entered with the refugees, on bicycles. They installed themselves in houses, and from there must have signalled to advance units of the Germans, for British troops nearby were soon being shelled so accurately that no explanation was conceivable other than treachery.

On a third occasion an order transmitted by these spies led to the premature withdrawal of the left flank of a Scottish regiment. The centre and right were beginning to move with them, when the colonel in command jumped himself into a Bren-gun carrier, dashed across the country, reached his men, stopped the retreat, and then, at the head of them, went into action with rifle and bayonet. They charged up a hill, stemmed the German advance, and recaptured the position from which they had retreated.

The German use of parachutists, though not so extensive or so effective as in Holland, did help materially to aggravate the confusion. Despatch riders, for instance, carrying messages from Dunkirk to advanced headquarters, never knew when, turning a bend in the road, they might find themselves faced with Germans, spraying machine-gun bullets.

On one occasion which was typical of many, an officer acting as a despatch rider had just passed over a bridge in a car, when he met another officer also in a car coming in the other direction. The two talked for a few moments, and the other officer continued his journey

over the bridge. He had only got a little distance down the road along which the first had come, when he was ambushed by five parachutists, who had hidden themselves in a ditch.

The officer's chauffeur was wounded. He himself blazed away with his revolver, and dragging the chauffeur out of the car, climbed down the bank and swam across a stream, still carrying his wounded companion, and finally reached a first-aid post belonging to the French.

It was suggested by those who came into contact with the parachute troops that the Nazis must have combed the prisons, and perhaps the concentration camps of Germany, picking out crooks and the most desperate characters for this extremely hazardous work. When they landed they behaved like madmen, shooting at anyone and anything in their path. Officers who interviewed captured parachutists came to the conclusion that they had been doped.

Courage was not the monopoly of the fighting men. In this hurried retreat it was impossible to bring away all of the men who had recently been wounded. They were left in villages and in the country houses, to fall into the hands of the Germans. Doctors and orderlies of the R.A.M.C. stayed with them, knowing that they were certain to be captured, but for all that, going about their work of tending and healing with quiet resolution, just as if they were in a base hospital far from the battle front.

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Grim as this battle of withdrawal was, it had its lighter moments. There was the case, for instance, of the portly gentleman with the rank of major, who had been attached to British G.H.Q. when it was situated at Arras. No one quite knew how he had got there or what he was doing, but it was obvious that he had never been to Sandhurst, and extremely doubtful if he had ever seen warfare of any kind at close quarters.

Like most civilians suddenly translated to the Army in middle life, he was always heavily on his dignity, and a somewhat notorious "collector" of salutes. None

the less, he was a likeable fellow, and as he had plenty of money he succeeded in having quite an enjoyable and luxurious time of it in Arras during the first eight months of the war that was no war. When the Blitzkrieg started, he was left behind in Arras to continue at his desk, totting up the columns of figures, or whatever else it was he was supposed to do.

Much to his bewilderment, however, the war moved rapidly towards him in his comfortable retreat. One morning he was awakened by the pounding of guns near at hand, and saw hundreds of troops making their way through the streets in what appeared to him to be the wrong direction. Hastily making his way outside, he encountered a colonel, a stranger to him, and from his rumpled clothes and bloodshot eyes, clearly one of those who had been in the thick of the battle.

"Here, you!" said the colonel to the major, evidently considering this no time for ceremony, "get in a car and contact the enemy." The sedentary major blinked. Had he heard aright? He begged the colonel's pardon.

"Oh, for God's sake, don't you understand plain English?" cried the colonel. "Take a car, sit at the wheel, let the clutch in, drive down that road" (pointing in the opposite direction to that which the passing troops were taking), "until you contact the enemy." "C-c-contact the enemy?" stammered the major. "That's what I said," replied the colonel grimly, "go on till you see them, and then come back and tell me where they've got to." But the major had an idea, and drew himself up. "No officer is permitted to drive a car," he reminded the other primly, "and there are no chauffeurs available." The colonel could find no more words. He pointed a shaking finger at the car. Reproachfully the major looked at him, opened his mouth to say something more, thought better of it, and getting into the car drove gingerly off.

A mile and a half down the road he climbed a rise. To his horror, spread out in front of him was a long, menacing and apparently endless line of tanks. The head of the column was only a few hundred yards away. Seldom, even by the most expert drivers, and the major

was far from that, being strictly a family motorist in peace time, has a car been so quickly thrown into reverse and turned round as was this one. Back to Arras with the tanks at his heels, and the bullets flying, came the major.

But something had happened to him in the course of that hectic ride. He found the colonel, delivered his report, and then looking the senior officer full in the face, inquired calmly: "Any further orders, sir?" That morning saw the birth of a soldier in Arras.

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Another and not dissimilar tale concerned the adventures of a sergeant who was left with two crew in charge of a small tank, at a farmhouse in an isolated pocket of the line during the retreat, while his officers and other men went off elsewhere in a larger tank. For two or three days they enjoyed an idyllic existence, and as there was nothing to do but keep the tank clean and one man on guard, they made themselves useful about the farm, which the war had denuded of its menfolk. Then one afternoon, like a bolt from the blue there arrived a dusty and travel-stained liaison officer on a motor-cycle, with an escort.

"Sergeant," he said, "the Germans are only a few kilometres away. A battalion of our infantry will be coming down this road in an hour. You and your men will join up with them. Before that, do your best to destroy your tank. Smash it up, if you can." The sergeant's eyes opened wide with horror. The tank was the apple of his eye.

"Smash up my tank!" he repeated in astonishment, "but, sir, my officer wouldn't like that." "Bother your officer," said the man on the motor-cycle. "Don't you realize that unless you do as I tell you, the tank will inevitably fall into German hands, and you yourselves will certainly be killed." "But, sir," expostulated the sergeant, "I couldn't smash up the tank unless my officer told me to." The weary captain lost his temper. "If you don't obey orders, I shall place you under arrest."

Then the sergeant thought of something else, and brightened. "Begging your pardon, sir, we haven't

paid for our billets, and we've no money until our officer comes back. Perhaps it would be best if we stayed where we were until he arrives." "Damn it, man," said the officer, pulling out a handful of francs and paper money, "I'll pay for your billets. You go and dismantle that tank."

Mournfully the sergeant and his two men set about their hateful task. Mournfully they took leave of the weeping farm-wife. Still more mournfully an hour later they attached themselves to the tail of the battalion of infantry. A good many hours later they arrived, tired and footsore, for walking was not in their line, at the coast. Nobody seemed to know where they were to go or what they were to do, and everybody was much too busy to listen to the tale of the tank that had been left behind. The sergeant wandered about the beach, muttering angrily to himself. A hail of bombs from the German Air Force, machine-gunning and artillery fire, made no impression on him. He was a single-minded man, and he was still worried about his tank.

Eventually he was packed on board a destroyer and landed at a British port, and when last heard of he was at a country clearing-station, pouring into a more sympathetic official ear this time, the story of how he came home empty-handed: "And even now, sir, I don't know how I'm going to face my officer when he hears that I came back to England without it."

It was the kind of story that Jack Warner might have told, except that this one happened to be true.

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A general source of amusement to the B.E.F. when they had a moment's respite was the attempt to influence them which was hopefully made by Goebbels' propaganda machine. In a lull between battle operations, aircraft flew over and dropped leaflets. They were roughly duplicated sheets, in very poor English. One of them read:

"British soldiers!

Germans are around! You are encircled!

German troops in Courtrai, Tournai, Valenciennes!

Lille, Aire, St. Omer are occupied!

Calais taken!

Why do you fight further?

Do you really believe the nonsense that Germans kill their prisoners? Come and see yourselves the contrary. The match is finished! A fair enemy will be treated fairly."

Needless to say, as propaganda it failed. As light relief it was very welcome.

Another leaflet gave a rough map, showing the position of the British troops, and declaring that as the Germans knew where the British were and had surrounded them they should surrender. The unit which got this leaflet, however, knew better. Their reply was to repulse the Germans in their immediate vicinity, and then to turn and fight their way back towards the coast.

It was a typical British instinct, too, and one which the Germans would never understand, that led many members of the B.E.F., under the most appalling conditions, to carry with them the dogs and other pets which they had made in their time of waiting. Without exception these dogs, when rescued, were well-fed and cared for, though pathetically nervous as a result of the bombing which they had been through. It seemed as if many of their masters must have shared their scanty rations with them.

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After two full days of the greatest rearguard action in military history, with every yard of ground contested and unimaginable odds cheerfully accepted, the fog of battle lifted sufficiently for it to be seen that the total catastrophe which had been feared was being turned into a supremely magnificent deliverance. It was with astonishment that the Governments in London and Paris heard of the extent to which evacuation from Dunkirk itself was already proceeding, and of the superb resistance which the crack regiments of both Armies were putting up in order to assist that delicate and dangerous operation.

The most sanguine hopes were surpassed, and with the increasingly effective co-operation of the Allied Navies and the growing ascendancy of our fighters in the

skies, it seemed that the end of the miracle was not yet.

Dunkirk, though, like so many of those one-time cheerful and popular seaside resorts nearby, it had been reduced to a waste of ruins, and was blazing fiercely, was none the less held ever more firmly. Outside, to the east, the floodgates had been opened, and the water, sinking well into the soil, was becoming a barrier to tanks as well as to infantry. On the south-west, from Gravelines to St. Omer, on the north-east from Nieuport to Ypres, the water-line ran, and linking this natural barrier were the heroic Allied troops.

What had threatened to be a circle was now a perimeter with a base that was staunchly held, thanks to the guns of the Navy and the prodigious feats of daring of the R.A.F. Against this Allied position, to which the B.E.F. had given the proud name of the "Corunna Line," one in which their French comrades amusedly acquiesced, the giant German steam-roller spent its force in vain.

The King's salute went across the water to hearten the resistance of the troops, and to heighten, if that were possible, their morale. To Lord Gort, their Commander-in-Chief, he sent the following message:

"All your countrymen have been following with pride and admiration the courageous resistance of the British Expeditionary Force during the continuous fighting of the last fortnight.

"Placed by circumstances outside their control in a position of extreme difficulty, they are displaying a gallantry that has never been surpassed in the annals of the British Army.

"The hearts of every one of us at home are with you and your magnificent troops in this hour of peril." To which the Commander-in-Chief replied:

"The Commander-in-Chief with humble duty begs leave on behalf of all ranks of the B.E.F. to thank your Majesty for your message.

"May I assure your Majesty that the Army is doing all in its power to live up to its proud tradition, and

is immensely encouraged at this critical moment by the words of your Majesty's telegram."

General Lord Gort was still in the field at this time, courting the same dangers with the lowest ranks, and many and narrow were the escapes from capture or annihilation which he and his Staff ran during these unbelievable days.

When G.H.Q. was at Hazebrouck, advance units of a German mechanized column appeared less than a quarter of a mile away. When the guards were about to fire, an officer cried: "Stop! If you leave them alone they may pass by us without knowing we are here." And that is exactly what did happen.

His Majesty's was not the only tribute to the B.E.F. at this time. Across the Atlantic came this comment from the *New York Times*: "The struggle in Flanders is becoming an epic of bravery and endurance, in which the British and French are living up to their finest military traditions. Survivors will bring back stories of individual and regimental heroism that will live as long as bravery is honoured among men. Those who never return will have left a memory that will inspire the Allied peoples for generations to come."

Italy, on the brink of war with us—the very "ranks of Tuscany"—could not forbear a cheer. The *Popolo di Roma* spoke of the B.E.F. as "defending itself with the greatest tenacity." And even the Berlin radio, which had so often spread calumny about Britain, paid handsome tribute to the Allies in these words:

"We must recognize that the British fighters were magnificent. Each soldier was of marvellous physique and full of fighting spirit. At Hazebrouck our soldiers had to storm each house separately. The castle took an extra day to capture, and our men found there nothing but a heap of ruins. In the Lille area the French soldiers fought magnificently. When they were at last forced to surrender because they had no more ammunition, German generals permitted them to march past with their arms, and saluted them."

What the Germans did not say, however, was that

General Prioux's divisions, sadly decimated by casualties, had none the less hacked their way back to the Corunna Line. It was the task of this gallant general, whose person the Germans claimed to have captured, to hold out until the flooding of the countryside outside Dunkirk had become effective.

In Lille, that huge textile centre which in peace time had some 800,000 inhabitants, and was in addition the most important road and rail junction in Northern France, his men held out to the last possible moment. One company of infantry occupied a block of flats on the outskirts of the town until their last bullet had been spent. Companies which had been reduced to twenty men fought to the bitter end, although for four or five days they had been without food and had no dressings for their wounded. And so, with their General, true to the traditions of the French Army, in the rearguard where his troops were in the greatest danger, and he was finally captured with his staff, this Army, a shadow of its former self, nevertheless fought its way out of the trap, matched its few tanks against the full mechanized panoply of the enemy, and reached Dunkirk.

It was a 70-mile journey, slow and infinitely hazardous, but having completed it, the Frenchmen did not hesitate to turn and fight with unwearying courage the enemy against whom they had, if ever any force did, fought in full and perilous measure.

So, with numbers swollen by the Prioux Army which had hewn a path through the German ranks, the Allies passed from the inferno of open fighting, with its blistering fire, beneath which men on both sides went down like grass under a mower, and its desperate hand-to-hand and single combats, into a fortress of refuge, of which the battlements were floods and the steady hands and eyes of men.

Within this fortress, the brilliant extrication of a great army by sea went on without cessation. And so long as there were comrades in arms who had still to find a ship, so long as it should be asked of them that they should hold out whatever the cost, as long were those dauntless men ready to sell their lives dearly but without compunction, and to hold the gate.

CHAPTER III

THE SAGA OF THE LITTLE BOATS

"So long as the English tongue survives, the word 'Dunkirk' will be spoken with reverence. In that harbour, such a hell as never blazed on earth before, at the end of a lost battle the rags and blemishes that had hidden the soul of democracy fell away.

"There, beaten but unconquered, in shining splendour, she faced the enemy, this shining thing in the souls of free men which Hitler cannot command. It is the great tradition of democracy. It is the future. It is victory."

New York Times, June 1, 1940.

DUNKIRK has long been a vital base in the wars of Western Europe. Some of the greatest soldiers of history have made it the strategic key of their campaigns.

It was first fortified in the tenth century by the Counts of Flanders, and for many years was a valuable prize in the constant warfare between these powerful Counts and their titular overlord, the King of France. Admiral Tromp and the Dutch Fleet helped Condé to take it for Louis XIV, "le roi soleil," and after it had passed into the possession of the Spaniards, Turenne again won it back for France. Then it passed into Cromwell's hands in recognition of the services which his Ironsides had rendered France, but remained English until Charles II sold it back to France for five million livres.

Vauban, that peer among military architects, fortified it, but these defences were destroyed in the eighteenth century under the terms of a peace treaty which we imposed upon France.

In the Great War, though never actually in the battle line, it suffered grievously from artillery and aerial bombardment. Many a veteran of 1914 remembers that piercing siren, nicknamed "Mournful Maria," which gave warning of a new barrage from the long-range guns or a new raid from the air. Thousands of bombs were dropped on it in the latter part of the Great War, and hundreds of civilians were killed.

So the place and its Flemish-speaking people, the fearless and stoical Dunkerquois, were no strangers to

the ordeal of battle. But never in its long history of siege and deliverance, of fortification and destruction, of assault from the sea, land, and air, had this citadel by the sea been called upon to face such horror and agony, and such wholesale ruin as in those last days of May, 1940.

A hundred acres of docks, the finest in France, after those of Marseilles and Bordeaux, were rendered useless by days of unceasing bombardment. The town itself caught fire in scores of places, after incendiary bombs had been dropped, and burnt so fiercely that hardly anything but the husk of what had once been a busy thriving port was left.

Yet it held out, as the water defences to the north and south filled up, and our guns kept watch on the high grass mounds outside the town.

In its final stage the Battle of Flanders became one in which all three services of the three Allies—for not all Belgians laid down their arms at King Leopold's command—co-operated magnificently. It was the first time in the history of warfare that forces on land, sea and air had established such a brotherhood of action. They worked for each other, and as one, in a unity such as no dragooned Nazi masses could ever attain.

In the face of the enemy's massed machines and hundreds of infantry, the Army kept up its dogged resistance. The R.A.F., and most spectacularly among its units the new and fittingly named Defiants, took no heed of superior numbers. On the sea the power of the Navy proved that this "sure shield," as King George V had called it, was still our first line of defence, not the last.

A rearguard action ending in an evacuation by sea, under fire, is the most strenuous and difficult of all military operations. Under the conditions which obtained at Dunkirk, it was particularly arduous. Not only was there air bombing, in addition to the artillery barrage which increased in intensity as the Germans pressed nearer to the coast, but also the nature of the place with which to contend. Shoal-water extends to a distance of twelve miles out from the coast, all the way

from Gravelines to Nieuport, so that no warship larger than a destroyer could get anywhere near the shore. In addition to these shallow waters there are strong tides in the area, and of course, in war time, few if any aids to navigation and no lights at night.

Indeed, the situation for days was so delicately poised between success and failure that one mistake in the handling of a ship might have blocked a vital channel, and prevented tens of thousands of men from getting away. Moreover there was the constant danger that a ship might be sunk by bombs in one of these narrow channels. The weather, though fine and clear, was not altogether an ally.

A fresh north-westerly wind blew on two of the five days when the evacuation was at its height, and this raised a surf which prevented work at the beaches from being as speedy as it might have been. Ground mist, not unusual at this time of year, which might have proved most valuable in hindering the activity of the German dive bombers, was conspicuous by its absence, except for part of one forenoon.

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It was soon clear that this "most extensive and difficult combined operation in naval history," as the Admiralty were later to describe it, could not meet with the maximum of success unless the Navy got help from outside.

The call therefore went out: "Volunteers wanted to evacuate the B.E.F.," to those whose names were at the Admiralty in the Small Vessels Pool. Foreseeing the possibility of a situation in which large numbers of such small craft might be needed, a special department had been set up in the Admiralty some time before, to collect information about all the available bottoms. The use of some had already been volunteered, and in some cases requisitioned. Others were on a waiting list. This was classified geographically, and when the Navy explained the situation at Dunkirk, the machinery was there to cope with it. Admiralty officials worked through the whole of one night and the following day, calling owners from bed, from their offices, from their

meals, and mobilizing from the little ships available in the Thames and on the East and South-East coasts, the strangest Armada that ever sailed the sea.

The ships were divided into two main classes, those that could be run on to the beaches to act as ferry boats, and those of deeper draught which could be taken backwards and forwards across the Channel at some speed. There were tugs and trawlers and barges, drifters and pleasure steamers, and motor ferries, in fact every conceivable size and shape of odd-job craft. Among those who served were Dutch *schluyts* and motor coasters, brought over from Holland to escape the Nazi invader, sailing boats, ancient and modern, luxurious steam yachts, and even rowing boats.

The rapid assembly of this motley fleet of over six hundred craft was carried out by volunteers. Fishermen left their nets, boat-builders left their yards, yachtmen left their clubs. All took to their boats and hastened with them to the assembly point, not knowing where they were going or even why they were wanted.

Typical of the magnificent spirit of the volunteers was the story told by an officer sent to Lowestoft. He rang back to London to say he had eight boats but crews for only six. While he waited at the telephone the organizer at the Admiralty rang up a yacht club. It was a quarter to nine at night, and a few of the members were telling yarns over an after-dinner drink. In less than two minutes the officer in London was able to tell Lowestoft, "Your crews are on the way." The men reached Lowestoft at dawn, and set off at once for Dunkirk.

On the Thames, the situation was rather the other way round. There were more men than boats.

For instance a naval officer called at a Labour Exchange and asked for men. All he could tell them at the time was that the work was dangerous and would probably last for several days. By the time the Exchange closed for the evening, 150 people had volunteered. Among them were labourers, and company directors.

So it happened that at one time there were about six times as many volunteers as there were boats for them.

to man. The Port of London Authority offices were besieged.

At first certain formalities were observed. Yachtsmen were told that they were to be on the strength of the Navy. They signed on for a month as junior officers. There was no time for them to be issued with uniforms. Some went in their yachting kit, others wore the bowler hats and mackintoshes in which they had gone down to their offices in the morning. Later they exchanged the bowler hats for steel helmets, but that was as near as most of them got to any kind of uniform.

Afterwards, even these formalities were eliminated, and almost everybody who wanted to go was found a place, from bargees to a senior Treasury official, who afterwards rang up to say he had had a "very interesting week-end, and if there are any more jobs to do I would like to be told."

Another volunteer was the son of the owner of a fine yacht, valued at a quarter of a million. Three months before, incidentally, the yacht had been hired to the country at a shilling a month. The young man, who understood navigation, was given a boat to take across, but arrangements were cancelled when his father pointed out that he was being treated by a specialist for an acute nervous breakdown. The son protested vigorously and fluently, and the next day when the officer who had dealt with his case was off duty, he managed to get across.

One man whose boat had been requisitioned without his even knowing about it, rang up the Admiralty to say: "There were £30 worth of old brandy and champagne in that boat." The Admiralty official began to apologize. "Not at all, old man," said the owner, "I just wanted to say that I hoped the boys had found it."

All sorts of people who ought not to have been there, merchant seamen who should have been with their ships, Army and Naval officers on leave, old men of over seventy and young boys in their early teens, and even some women, smuggled their way into one or other of the crews.

Six experienced yachswomen offered their services and were rejected. One of them was not so easily put off. She tried again the next day, on the telephone, making her voice sound as much like a man's as she could. But the Admiralty official was too smart for her, and again she was refused. "Why?" she asked, still in a gruff voice. "Because your sex is against you," replied the Admiralty. "Blast my sex!" said the voice, suddenly turning soprano, and the authorities had a shrewd idea that the voice sooner or later did find its way into the Armada after all.

Two young men who offered to take a boat over, confessed that they knew nothing about engines. "If you get somebody to start us up, we'll be all right," they said. Somebody did, and they went boldly off, though they knew perfectly well if the motor stopped they could never start it again.

Another man turned up in a canoe with an outboard motor, the kind of craft that is suitable for the upper reaches of the Thames. "What do you think you can do, even supposing you get to Dunkirk?" they asked him. His reply was, "I might be able to bring off one man."

Then there was the factory at Ramsgate where volunteers were called for. This was the appeal that was made: "You are going into hell. You will be bombed and machine-gunned. Will you fetch back the lads?" There was no hesitation. Tools were downed. The engineers marched off to ships they had never seen before. In less than half an hour they had sailed for the bomb-infested waters off Dunkirk.

Such was the spirit that infused the start of the enterprise and was to make it so spectacularly successful. There was no time to be lost. Already battle-weary men were arriving on the beaches on the other side, and the Nazi forces were slowly closing in upon them.

So, from the Humber round the coast to Southampton, this brave miscellany of craft, this strange improvization of a fleet, set out upon its hazardous journey.

From Poole in Dorset came the lifeboat, sturdily and confidently manned by a crew that had so often braved

nature in all her fury that the thought of shot and shell was of small account to them.

From their moorings in the Solent came graceful sailing yachts, their masts dipping beneath the wind, racing this time not for a prize but against death itself.

In attendance upon them, like pages to the knights of old, went the humbler craft which in peace time were to be seen every summer week-end winding their way in and out of the creeks near Bosham.

From the villages of the Sussex coast which still earned their livelihood by fishing, came the stout little off-shore boats.

Brighton and the other pleasure resorts sent their excursion paddlers, "butterfly boats," as the men of the merchant navy used once upon a time, rather contemptuously, to call them.

From places like Deal and Sandwich, men who used to beguile the holiday-maker with cries of "Nice day for a trip!" took their motor-boats across, often with a string of rowing-boats in tow.

Down the Thames came the tugs and the red-sailed luggers and a dozen more types of craft.

Out of the Crouch and the Blackwater, from Burnham and Maldon and Mersea came jaunty little sloops, whose owners had never thought to put them to any but the idlest uses.

From Lowestoft fishing-boats put out which had known the fury of northern blizzards. This time it was a different kind of storm they were sailing into.

With their motley and unorthodox crews, Trinity pilots and trawler skippers side by side with the veriest landlubbers, they sailed across the placid waters of the Channel, the straits of Dover, and the North Sea, into hell.

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Meanwhile the Royal Navy, destroyers, gun-boats, minesweepers, armed trawlers, drifters, and tugs, 222 vessels in all, was engaged in and near Dunkirk, in innumerable tasks. There were demolitions to be done. The Army had to be supported with counter-battery fire whenever possible. The anti-aircraft gunners were

almost without respite in port, off the coast, and further out at sea. A watch had to be kept for submarines and the new high-speed torpedo boats of the enemy, which were attempting to throw the warships into confusion. All these difficult and dangerous operations, however, were subsidiary to the main duty, which was to bring away as many of the B.E.F. as it could and as quickly.

The experiences of one flotilla of warships were characteristic of what happened to almost all of them. From a base on the shores of Britain they were ordered to Dunkirk. On the way over they were attacked six times by dive bombers. One destroyer was damaged. The situation did not permit of her going back without doing the job for which she had come. Through the shallows she went first, to take off her load of soldiers from the shore. Her companions remained outside, keeping a watch for enemy bombers, and actually shooting down several. Out came the damaged ship, her decks packed with men, and limped her way back across the Channel. Then the others took their turn.

One was attacked, while actually embarking an infantry unit, by bombers flying too high for the protecting guns to reach them. The bombs fell wide, and no casualties were suffered. When she emerged from the shoals, however, it was not to go directly home, for once again bombers, low-flying this time, made their appearance, and the destroyer had to act as a cover for other unarmed transports which were coming out at the same time.

In the course of no fewer than a dozen dive-bombing attacks in as many minutes, bomb splinters holed the destroyer's side.

There were no direct hits, but so close were the misses that more splinters wrecked the main steam pipe, and wounded a number of the soldiers on deck. Disabled, she was at once taken in tow by another ship. However, her commander decided that it was unwise to delay the second destroyer which was also heavily laden. He therefore transferred all his passengers to the other ship, and she made off at once. Then he let down his anchor and set his engine-room staff to work on the damage

while his gunners kept up an unceasing fight against the bombers.

Nearly two hours passed, two hours of unbelievable noise and danger, during which it seemed that bombs fell regularly at the rate of one a minute. Then steam was raised again. He returned to his base at 20 knots, and though his sides were still gaping, demanded to be permitted to go back at once for another trip.

An official "Naval Eye-Witness" was on board another which was damaged before it even reached the Flanders beaches. After wriggling its way through the minefields in the middle of the night, the ship ran full tilt into some wreckage about three o'clock in the morning, and one of the propellers was fouled. An attempt was made to go ahead with both engines, but the result was an alarming series of shuddering hops and jumps.

Taking this as sufficient protest from his ship, the captain decided to go ahead on the one engine which was undamaged, and they crept towards the entrance to Dunkirk harbour. There the ship lay to, and by flashing a lamp it was explained to the British Admiral's headquarters in Dunkirk, exactly what had happened.

Unless he got authority to do so the captain was doubtful whether he ought to attempt to enter the harbour and manœuvre alongside a wharf with the ship in its crippled condition. While they were waiting for a reply a German bomber appeared out of the clouds, and was kept off by accurate fire from the destroyer's guns.

Then at last from the inside of the harbour came the flicker of a signal lamp. It said "Enter harbour forthwith." It was a case now of taking every risk so that that order might be obeyed. He rang down half-speed on both engines. This time, miraculously, after one more groan and jump, the ship cleared the obstruction, whatever it was, and was able to make a smooth passage, through the entrance, into the harbour.

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The hail of bombs continued ceaselessly. The artillery fire increased. The seas were alive with mines and

torpedoes. But the Navy carried on. Again and again the crews of warships and ancillary vessels risked their lives.

The astonishing thing was, astonishing, that is, to anyone who does not know the Navy, that the more harassed they were and the more dangerous conditions got, the more they laughed and the more they cursed, **not at the danger but at little insignificant things** which offended their sense of tidiness. For instance, there was one German bomb that fell in shallow water so close that having exploded on the bottom it deluged the whole ship and everybody on board with grey mud.

This seemed to infuriate the crew even more than if they had suffered a direct hit. Nor was their pride appeased when they passed a small boat manned by amateurs, whose sides, incidentally, were riddled with bomb splinters, and whose captain looked out on the world through one eye which was all that bandages had left of his face. At the sight of the destroyer and its crew plastered with mud, everybody on board the little volunteer vessel burst out laughing.

At the same time, so an observer said, there was one happy man on board, the gunner's mate. He had found a Bren gun abandoned on the beach. Sand had jammed the works, and he spent a long time, in perfect contentment, taking it to pieces, oiling it, and putting it together again. "We'll have some fun with this," he said, "I've never had a Bren gun in my hands before."

The commander of another destroyer was nursing a very bitter private grievance before he got back to his base. To begin with, his ship was sunk and he was picked up out of the water by another ship. He was covered in oil. One of the officers of the rescuing ship found a spare pair of flannel trousers and a blanket for him, to replace his ruined uniform. He took a bath, and had just stepped out of it when that ship was struck by a bomb, which went right through the bath in which a moment ago he had been reclining.

Again he found himself in the water. Again he had to swim around until yet another ship picked him up. This time, if possible, he was even dirtier than before,

and when he got back to his base, without further mishap, he was still a very angry man.

For the sailors of at least one ship, however, a perilous voyage had its compensations. While engaged in taking off British soldiers from the beach near Dunkirk, someone observed, with astonishment, two pairs of bare and uncommonly attractive legs hanging over the side of a small boat. The owners of the legs were wearing tin hats and tunics which had once belonged to British infantrymen. But they were, as the first sight of them had suggested, no ordinary Tommies.

They were hauled out of their boat and on to the deck of the destroyer, where their identity was soon revealed. They were the 21-year-old daughter of an Australian soldier and a 19-year-old Belgian girl.

The Australian girl's father had stayed on in France after the last War and had become one of the keepers of the War Graves. His daughter and her friend had set up a café in Poperinghe, and when the B.E.F. retreated they had stayed to the last to serve the troops with coffee and wine. Then they escaped, and after ten days of remarkable adventure found themselves in the sea off Dunkirk, and for a short but pleasant time the honoured and highly popular guests of His Majesty's Navy.

The traditional chivalry of the Navy towards the other sex did not break down even under the intense conditions which prevailed at Dunkirk. There was one small armed craft which, in the course of twelve hours, made two trips to the area of withdrawal, and in the evening set off again for a third load of passengers. This time, at the part of the beach where they arrived, they found a bedraggled group of Army nurses. As dusk fell, they succeeded in embarking them all. When the women got on board, however, the men saw that they were soaked to the skin, and that their uniforms and aprons were covered with dirt and blood and sand. At their commander's instruction, the seamen quickly rigged up a dormitory in the corner of the mess deck. They brought their own blankets for the girls to wrap themselves in, and told them to sleep while they could.

Most of the women naturally took the opportunity of getting out of their drenched clothes, and when they woke up some hours later, having meanwhile reached a British resort, they were somewhat alarmed to find that their uniforms had completely disappeared. However, in a moment or two, two or three of the seamen arrived, beaming all over their faces, and carrying, with the care of a costumier at a mannequin show, the uniforms, washed, pressed and ironed. It was as launderers that the crew, tired as they were and fired upon continually, had spent the night. Thus it was a party of immaculately clad nurses who stepped ashore.

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While the Navy went on, calmly and collectedly, with its work of rescuing the first thousands of men from the B.E.F., while, inland, some of the finest regiments of the British Army were staying behind to cover the retirement, Dunkirk itself was becoming the focus of the most pitiless bombardment in all history. The courage of the French civilian population was beyond praise. All those who could help in any way to aid the evacuation stayed at their posts regardless of personal danger. These included women workers in the telephone and telegraph exchanges.

Those who had no jobs to do but who had been unable to escape into the country, took refuge in the deepest cellars of the town, where for days on end they lived the life of troglodytes. The bombings which had begun by concentrating on the harbour and on the railways were extended to cover the whole town, and into this murderous assault the German Air Force threw every type of plane at its command.

Street after street was set burning with incendiary bombs, and anyone who was unfortunate to be caught out of doors, whether in uniform or not, was mercilessly machine-gunned. Every kind of bomb was used in a systematic effort to reduce the whole place to a shambles, from the heaviest type of high explosive to the small delayed-action "pencil."

If the civilian population did venture into the open

when there was a lull, it was to find British and French soldiers and old men, women and children, lying dead in the most tragic confusion in the roads and in the ruins of houses. There was no time to bury them before the next wave of bombers came over. Food was short, and British troops went round the shelters sharing their sardines and bully beef. Water and electricity supplies had been cut off for days, and on the outskirts of the town oil tanks which had held millions of gallons of petrol were burning furiously. Indeed, the only respite that the town got from bombing was when dense clouds of smoke rolled up over the town from these burning tanks, and served for a time as a merciful shroud.

Despite the rain of death and destruction, some of the jetties from which the rescue ships were being loaded held firm, though their sides had been blasted from straight lines into fantastic curves, and their surfaces were pitted with bomb craters. It was still possible but perilous to use them.

One unit of the Guards actually marched through the town and along the narrow quay, in formation which would have done them credit on a parade ground.

Bombs dropped all around the ships as they lay alongside, sending up awesome fountains of foaming mud and water. At the same time machine gun bullets kept up a devilish patter on the decks. But no terror could interfere with the Navy as it went about its work, or break the discipline of the troops as they climbed up the scaling ladders and took their places on the decks.

It was inevitable, of course, that some of our ships should suffer disaster, inevitable too that there should be casualties among the closely packed troops on board them. But the really miraculous thing was that the sinkings were so few and the casualties so small.

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Though tens of thousands of men were taken off from the jetties in a continuous stream of destroyers, transports, armed sloops and trawlers, still more and more men arrived, and the outlet from the harbour itself became quite inadequate. So these weary but unbroken

cohorts were ordered to march on to the beaches instead, and there to wait their rescuers.

It was a terrible place to be, a huge stretch of level sand with a shallow sea in front and dunes behind. There was no shred of natural cover, and the majority of the men were already worn out with days of fierce fighting. How endless those hours of waiting must have seemed! Yet they accepted heat and thirst and aerial menaces alike, with the same indomitable cheerfulness that had marked all stages of their retreat. In fact, so calm were they as they stood or lay there that they might have been waiting to go on a pleasure trip, if it had not been for their torn and ragged clothes and their red-rimmed infinitely weary eyes. One of their rescuers described the scene on the beach as being "like Blackpool on a Bank Holiday."

Some of the soldiers worked with children's spades to try to dig themselves a bit of cover. Some of them, acting on the principle that an aeroplane never drops two bombs in the same place, crouched in the craters where bombs had already fallen. Others, taking no heed of the raiders, played scratch games of football with any old bundle of rags for a ball.

Others again, less actively inclined, lay on the sand and discussed West Ham's chances of winning the Cup.

One or two had grimy packs of cards with which only three weeks before—incredible thought—they had relieved the tedium of their uneventful vigil on the Western Front. If they had any francs left they played for money just to give a bit of spice to the game, though they were not likely to have much use for francs, at any rate for some time to come. A few even stripped and took a bathe. Afterwards they described the water as "very warm," which was accurate in more senses than one. Other men, the fathers of children for the most part, displayed the skill they had learned in peace-time holidays, and built sand-castles.

All these things might have been done in a kind of delirium, but were actually a form of the highest discipline. The only thing they grumbled about was the monotony of their scanty rations.

There were some nurses there who should have been embarked among the first, but who with a superb defiance of orders preferred to stay behind, taking such shelter as they could find on the dunes and in the bomb craters, in order to look after the wounded. They had very few bandages, but they improvised as good nurses will. They had hardly any drugs, but the calmness of their example, and their soothing words served instead. The spirit of Florence Nightingale walked those blazing beaches.

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Meanwhile the Armada of the Little Ships was on its way. On a map the trip across seems short enough, but many of these craft had to make a round trip of over 100 miles in order to avoid minefields. The voyage across was by no means without incident. Many of the smaller boats had their decks wrecked with bullets, and those which were large enough to carry wireless more often than not had it shot away.

No one thought of turning back. Even those craft which were holed, plugged the damage as best they could, or even baled out the water as it came in. They went on just the same. Near to the French shore the German batteries on land added their attack to that of the bombers. The work of getting the men off was extremely hazardous, but with the help of naval officers on the beach, who took no thought for their own safety, it was managed with remarkable efficiency.

The shallow-bottomed boats were beached, including the Thames barges, but the bigger vessels had to be filled from rowing boats. In some cases the men waded or swam out to their rescuers. At night thousands of men lay flat on the beach, motionless, unable to light a cigarette, for hour after hour, in order to attract as little attention as possible from the bombers. As fast as some were shipped, others wriggled forward flat on their faces to the water's edge, to take their turn.

Eight Heinkels swept over one of the northern beaches, while a party of men under the orders of a sergeant were loading ammunition which had been saved from the

retreat. Their machine guns were beginning to take a heavy toll of the men, when the sergeant, who was a R.A.S.C. man, grabbed a Bren gun, set it up in the open, and blazed steadily away at the German planes as they dived over his head. Back they came, and fired again at him and his munitions. Finally, however, they gave it up as a bad job, and he went on superintending the removal.

This was not the end of the adventures of this particular sergeant, however, for outside the harbour he saw a man struggling in the sea, and dived into it with a sailor, to rescue him. A little while later, having clambered back on board, their boat was holed, and he found himself in the water once again. **This time it was someone else's turn to rescue the sergeant.**

Some of the men on the beach—they were Cameron Highlanders and Green Howards—showed an almost inhuman resolution. When naval officers went to them and told them "It's your turn now," they said in reply, "Over there there are wounded, with doctors and nurses. Take them first, and then come back for us." These men had been on the shell and gun-scourged beaches for hours, yet were still able to think of those whose plight was worse than theirs.

Sometimes, of course, the boats got stuck, and there were officers who spent a whole day in the sea, up to their waists in water, helping to push off the boats which had grounded. Two young naval cadet officers helped in a different way. They had stowed away, quite illegitimately, a couple of Bren guns in the small trawler on which they came over. When they got to the beach, they set them up, and blazed away at any bombers that came over. They brought down at least two Junkers. When they were finally taken off again, still carrying their guns, they were officially reprimanded by senior officers for having taken them, and then warmly congratulated on the excellence of their marksmanship.

One lifeboat was responsible for a most daring and valuable rescue. A British minesweeper of over a thousand tons had gone aground while trying to work her way into a dock. At 35 feet away from the jetty she

stuck fast, and no reversing of the engines was of any avail. The commander looked about him for help. Not far away the lifeboat was going methodically about her business of collecting men. He hailed the coxswain. "Get a line of my stern," he yelled, "and pull me off."

Quite oblivious of the shrapnel from the German batteries which was falling all around, the coxswain and his crew did as they were bidden. The rope was made fast, the lifeboat tugged, and the minesweeper slid off the mud into deep water again.

Another lifeboat, which had already done fine duty in the early months of the war, rescuing over two hundred men from mined ships, was in the thick of this action, with men over sixty years old on board. Bombs fell around them in a continuous shower, and machine-gun bullets cut the water. They had no means of retaliation, so the old salts just shook their fists at the sky and got on with their job.

One 70-year old naval pensioner made seven journeys in a motor-boat, and on the last his craft was sunk by the wash of two British destroyers.

"Like flies in the air, those German aeroplanes were," he said, "but our boys were all cheerful and full of fight. My boat is only licensed to carry twelve passengers, but I had forty-eight in it, and a lot of heavy equipment as well."

One of the things which spurred the rescuers' energy was the fact that however fast they worked there still seemed to be endless lines of men waiting patiently on that terrible beach. One man who only a few weeks before was a cinema manager in a London suburb, told how when he got to Dunkirk he and an able seaman left the ship in which they had crossed over, and took a small boat to the beach, to row the soldiers out.

"We could only take eight at a time, but on each trip about fifty waded out to us. Some had been doing that for four days. On one of our trips the man with me got a machine-gun bullet in his leg. I took him back, and the next time I saw him he was trying to get the bullet out with his sheath-knife. When the skipper would not let him come back with me, he got really angry, went up

on the deck, and worked it off by letting rip at the aeroplanes with a machine-gun."

A little Thames boat, *The Lark*, had an odyssey all its own. It had been towed over to France, laden with supplies for the troops. When it got there it was pulled ashore with bully-beef, biscuits, chocolate, and thousands of tins of water. The water was welcome enough, but the men had had enough of bully-beef and biscuits for the time being. They finished off the chocolate, however, and after waiting a long time for someone to come and evacuate them, the shelling became so heavy that they decided that the best thing they could do was to take a risk in *The Lark* itself.

Clearly it had never been built for crossing the Channel, but one of the party said he knew how to set sail. So nearly a hundred men emptied *The Lark* of the bully-beef and biscuits, left them on the beach, improvised a sail, and pushed off. Slowly they moved into the Channel. There, making rather heavy weather, they were picked up by another British ship. *The Lark* had done its job and, having been tied up behind, bobbed merrily and proudly homeward.

Another unlikely little craft which played a gallant part in the evacuation flotilla was that trim fire-fighter known to a great many Londoners, called the *Massey Shaw*. Her skipper, a sub-officer, six firemen of the London Fire Brigade, and six from the Auxiliary Fire Service, formed the crew; their only protection was a handful of rifles. Hardly any of the men had ever attempted any sort of deep water navigation before, but that did not detain them, and they ploughed their way safely across a choppy sea, to Dunkirk.

They made two successful trips across the Channel, saving several hundred men in the process, and then went back for more. On this third trip, with conditions getting rapidly worse, the *Massey Shaw* was the smallest craft which was allowed to return. This time she went right into the harbour to load her passengers, and once again was lucky enough to get back home without mishap, after a lively trip.

The determination to go back, no matter what the

danger, or the cost, was not peculiar to the brave little fire-boat from Lambeth. There was many a case where craft had been so badly damaged that if the weather had changed for the worse they must inevitably have foundered. But under orders, and in some cases in spite of them, they went back. Into safety, off with the load, a turn-about, and back across the Channel; that was the routine.

Even those whose boats were actually sent to the bottom were not dismayed. If they were picked up, the first thing they did on landing was to volunteer to return to the inferno. There was one engineer from a Thames passenger boat, for instance, who was brought back to London dripping wet and wounded into the bargain. Nothing but physical force stopped that man from going back again, though he was fit for nothing but hospital.

Old fishermen, too, worn out with long hours and a succession of dangers, were with the utmost difficulty persuaded to take some rest. Sometimes when they were sleeping for an hour or two, other volunteers would creep down to their boats with nothing but a pocket compass to guide them. These self-appointed "relief" crews also found their way to the opposite coast.

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The officers and men of the R.N.V.R. were indefatigable. One of them had his trawler put out of action when she hit a derelict outside one of our own ports, but he had just shot down a Messerschmitt with his own hand, and his blood was up. As soon as he was brought ashore he made for the local office of a bank, where the manager was a friend of his. The manager owned a yacht. That afternoon the officer went back to Dunkirk in it. The bank manager was his navigating officer.

Another man from the R.N.V.R. got into Dunkirk without any charts. These had been blown away by the blast from a bomb. He was commanding a flat-bottomed Dutch coastal boat, and having taken his load of a score of Tommies aboard, he thought, "Well, here goes." If he struck a mine, it was just too bad. It was a chance that had to be taken. But when he got a little

way out from the shore, he found to his horror that a long procession of small craft was following him. They thought, apparently, that he knew the way. Actually he had only the vaguest idea of it.

However, with shells and bombs falling all round, the most sensible course seemed to be to keep going ahead. That is what he did, trusting partly to luck, partly to instinct. A good many hours later that long straggling line of tiny craft was seen sailing into a south-eastern port after their leader, like a line of ducklings following their mother.

It often happened that boats which had been written down as missing turned up safely long afterwards. There was one lifeboat, for instance, which was discovered very early one morning tied up to the stern of a light-ship, close into the English coast. The soldiers and sailors on board had worked together for many hours the day before, trying to refloat their boat when it ran on to a sandbank. Despite German shelling, they had succeeded and had made their way across the Channel in the dark. Then they came across the lightship. They did not know where they were, and they were so weary that they had not strength enough even to raise a loud cry for help. So they just made their boat fast, and lay down and slept until morning came.

Another ship's lifeboat had a narrow escape when caught by a treacherous tide. It was crammed full of men who were being taken out to a tug. First of all the tide carried them down the coast and then swung them round side on to the sea, where they stuck and began to fill. The only chance for them all was if the passengers went into the water. They were tired almost beyond belief, but one of their number more wideawake than the rest shouted at them fiercely, and over the side they went. Thus lightened, the boat's crew were able to get the head off and to keep it off, and then most of the men who had gone overboard were hauled in again. In the end the boat found the tug, and once more the weary men who were huddled together, officers with privates, French with English, sleeping on each other's shoulders, had to wake up and clamber aboard the larger vessel.

When morning came, Dorniers and Junkers dived out of the mist, and the tug's machine-guns went into action, but even their insistent rattle could not wake the men who lay stretched out in utter exhaustion on the decks.

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The spirit which brought the B.E.F. back home may be summed up in the stories of the elderly yachtsman, of that famous character, "Potato" Jones, and of two Thames boatmen.

The yachtsman was discovered under what at first seemed to be suspicious circumstances, lying in the grass on a cliff above a famous south-east coast resort. It must be confessed that he did not look like a yachtsman. True, his suit seemed as if once upon a time it had come from a good tailor, but it was torn and shapeless and stained with sea water. He was asleep. "Come on, there," said a policeman who discovered him, "what do you think you're doing?"

The elderly gentleman sat up, blinked and with great deliberation fished about in the grass at his side. He retrieved something and placed it on his head. It was the cap of one of the most famous yacht clubs in the world. Then he got up rather stiffly, and said with determination, "Must get back, officer. Fellows over there still. Where's my boat?"

It was later discovered that this man had made no fewer than four return trips to France in the space of thirty-six hours.

Captain "Potato" Jones became a national figure when he repeatedly ran General Franco's blockade in the Spanish Civil War. But that was by no means the end of him either as a seaman or a hero. Two months before Dunkirk, this tough 67-year-old sea dog was bombed by a German plane and had his shoulder broken. Though no doctor would have passed him as fit, he was not to be kept out of an adventure after his own heart. One soldier told how he scrambled aboard a small steamer from a motor boat, and began to help the crew pull in a hawser. "Suddenly a terrifying voice yelled at me, 'Hey, you! Stop that! Leave my men to run their

own ship. You come and work this damned gun.' " Accordingly several of the rescued men ran over to the gun, took charge of it, and began to use it to good purpose against the dive bombers.

When the boat was clear, they asked who the old fellow with the sergeant-major's voice was. One of the crew said in an awestruck whisper, "Why, that was the Old Man, 'Potato' Jones himself. He never could abide amateurs trying to run his ship."

They also served, however, who only stayed behind. Many boatmen on the Thames had the job of bringing down the river craft, which were to play their part in the evacuation of the troops. They were kept at it day and night without rest or sleep, and at one point two of them who had been working without a stop for four days and nights, went to see the Naval authorities.

They saluted, and the spokesman of the two said: "Boats coming along nicely now, sir. Like sausages out of a machine. Can we go over ourselves?"

They were so tired that the one who had not spoken was asleep on his feet, and even the other's head was swaying up and down as he waited for the answer. When it came, a kindly negative, they woke up. As they went out of the door, they could be heard swearing, with the fluency of which the Thames bargee alone is capable, that the "perishing Navy wanted all the ——— soft jobs."

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In contrast to this tale of selfless courage and endurance in the Channel was the bombing by Nazi airmen of two hospital ships. These were the *Worthing* and the *Paris*, which in time of peace were regular cross-Channel steamers. The attack on the *Paris* took place in clear daylight, when the ship was in mid-Channel. She was clearly marked with the Red Cross, and on her way to Dunkirk with a party of doctors and nurses aboard.

Suddenly out of a cloudless sky three dive bombers swooped, and the ship was hit three times. The crew and the ambulance party took to the boats, and the radio

officer stayed behind to send out SOS signals. It seemed as if the bombers must have picked up the messages, for back they came, and this time dropped seven bombs. One hit the davit of a boat that was just being launched. The six voluntary nurses aboard had already been put on one of the other boats, but the stewardess, the only other woman aboard, was lifted off her feet, and fell in the sea many yards away. She was picked up later. The deck boy, who was seventeen years old, was killed.

The nurses behaved magnificently. They showed no sign of panic, and ducked like old soldiers when machine-gun bullets came spattering round the boats. One girl was wounded in the shoulder, but made no murmur. British planes came up and drove the Germans off. After some time, the boats were sighted by a warship, and everybody in them was rescued. One of the nurses had recently been spending most of her time looking after German wounded.

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The remarkable success of the embarkation as a whole flouted all the principles laid down for trooping by the Admiralty Manual. Indeed, some of the compilers of that elaborate document must have turned in their graves at the unorthodox ways in which the operations were carried out. In the ordinary way, moving troops in large numbers by sea needs extensive preparation beforehand, if confusion is to be avoided. This time there were no big troopships, no detailed arrangements, and only a handful of official transport officers. Nor was any embarkation of such a size ever done in complete view of the enemy from the air. Yet the professionals of the Navy, combined with the amateurs of the Little Armada, worked so efficiently that although some confusion was inevitable, the unflagging zeal, unstinted bravery and remarkable ingenuity of all concerned produced a result which more than compensated for the absence of rules and regulations.

CHAPTER IV

THE MIRACLE OF DELIVERANCE

It was on Tuesday, May 28, that the King of the Belgians deserted and the British Army's left flank was left exposed. On that day it had seemed as though the most the nation could hope for would be for a handful of men to be saved from the Flanders plain.

On Wednesday, the Flanders battle continued with that extraordinary fury which has been described in another chapter. That day too saw the French marines garrisoning the port, the Allied warships guarding it from the sea. The remarkable resistance thus put up lightened the prospect, so that only twenty-four hours after Mr. Churchill had made his grave statement in the House of Commons there were increasing hopes that a larger part of the Allied Armies would eventually be evacuated.

By Thursday the process of evacuation itself had begun, and thousands of men, including many *poilus*, arrived in this country. The heroic rearguard action continued, and was superbly assisted by the feats of our aircraft.

Friday saw the worst bombardment of all upon Dunkirk and upon its harbour, but although it hindered the evacuation and made it more difficult, neither the terror from the air nor the long-range guns on land prevented its being increased until what had been a tiny trickle became a steady flow.

By Saturday, almost unbelievable figures were being whispered of the men already brought back, and for once rumour was less than the truth. It was a good sign that Lord Gort was able to come back to England, because everyone knew that so gallant a commander would not have left if the situation was not well in hand. When he did leave, it was under orders from home. In the short but fierce Battle of Flanders which was now ending he had proved himself to be not only a dashing and inspiring leader of men, but also a tactician of the

greatest skill. He was received by the King and invested with the insignia of a Knight Grand Cross of the Order of the Bath. His next task was to prepare for renewed service at the head of a rebuilt, re-equipped Expeditionary Force.

At the head of affairs on the British side, he and Mr. Eden, the War Secretary, shared the triumph of bringing home the B.E.F. Throughout that hectic week, Mr. Eden, though he had only been at the War Office a matter of days, displayed cool judgment, tireless energy, and a remarkable capacity for organization.

On the Sunday night the nation and Empire heard him announce over the radio that more than four-fifths of the British Forces which the Germans claimed five days before to have surrounded, had been brought back safely to this country, together with tens of thousands of French troops. The people heard the news with thanksgiving in their hearts. Mr. Eden's broadcast contained a stirring tribute to the spirit of the B.E.F.:

"It is that spirit," he said, "that has won through. These men have marched hundreds of miles. They have fought countless actions with an enemy which hemmed them in and pressed upon them from three sides. The German High Command proudly announced that they were surrounded. They have fought their way out. How have they achieved the seemingly impossible?"

"Man for man the British troops have proved themselves superior to the Germans wherever they have met them. All accounts show that the B.E.F. took a toll of the enemy greatly in excess of that suffered by themselves. On at least two occasions—at Arras, and on the Ypres-Comines Canal—the losses suffered by the German Army were enormous. So it is that at the last, the German strategy was foiled, and that despite the surrender of the Belgian Army our own troops and our French Allies with them, have fought their way through."

Mr. Eden went on to describe the sequence of events, how the B.E.F. had advanced to the River Dyle in a movement lasting several days, and how they had to come back in less than half that time. He described his

first phase as "brilliantly executed." It was 75 miles forward; there was a fight at the end of the advance; then 75 miles back, fighting all the way. That was done in ten days. Mr. Eden went on:

"I have a report of one division which did not lose a single straggler on that hundred-and-fifty mile march. And here is a quotation from an account of an eye-witness of our troops under fire, that 'no display of drill at Olympia could be smarter than the work of men of our Forces that I saw. The feeling of confidence was magnificent.'"

The Secretary for War went on to describe how, through events which were not under its control the B.E.F. had to continue its retreat, and how it finally found itself fighting for its life in the neighbourhood of Dunkirk. He spoke of troops which had marched thirty-five miles in twenty-four hours, of nine divisions which were at one time holding a front of eighty miles, and told how, at the end, when they had fought themselves to a standstill they held their ground and so enabled the remainder of the Expeditionary Force to get clear.

"The stories of individual exploits at this time are legion: an anti-tank gunner who knocked out seven tanks: a subaltern who, after knocking out hostile tanks, swam a canal to bring back marked maps and other booty. But the triumph is not the triumph of individuals, however gallant; it is the triumph of an Army. There is no braver epic in all our annals."

He went on to repeat what tens of thousands of men on reaching these shores had already said, that the Army's debt to the Royal Navy, to the Merchant Navy, and the Royal Air Force could never be forgotten, and he concluded:

"The British Expeditionary Force still exists, not as a handful of fugitives, but as a body of seasoned veterans. We have had great losses in equipment. But our men have gained immeasurably in experience of warfare and in self-confidence. The vital weapon of any army is its spirit. Ours has been tried and tempered in the furnace. It has not been found wanting. It is this

refusal to accept defeat that is the guarantee of final victory.

"Our duty in this country is plain. We must make good our losses and we must win this war. To do that we must profit by the lessons of this battle. Brave hearts alone cannot stand up against steel. We need more planes, more tanks, more guns. The people of this country must work as never before. We must show the same qualities, the same discipline, and the same self-sacrifice at home as the British Expeditionary Force have shown in the field.

"The nation honours with proud reverence those who fell that their comrades might win through. The innumerable actions, the countless deeds of valour of the last week, cannot all be recorded now. Each will have its place in history. Soldiers, sailors, airmen, who gave their lives to help—theirs is an immortal memory. Their spirit must be our banner, their sacrifice our spur."

This eloquent speech, finely delivered, left the peoples of the British Isles and of the Empire feeling prouder and happier than they had thought only a few days before that it was possible for them to be. In the news of the numbers already saved there was a sense of a crowning mercy.

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The story of the last thirty-six hours in Dunkirk, from Sunday night when Mr. Eden spoke, until Tuesday morning, was one in which the valour of the French stood out gloriously. On the beaches the troops continued to embark in large numbers and in splendid order. Air attacks were fewer than they had been, for by this time the R.A.F. had established a local superiority, but the artillery fire grew more intense as the enemy moved up large guns to attack the defenders.

The passage through the flood zones was defended by French infantry, aided by British marines. They fought from dry ground, covering the artificial marshes with their guns, while the Germans made the slowest of progress through the mud and water.

The opening of the sluice gates a week before had by this time had its full effect. The water had sunk deeply into the soil, dykes were collapsing, and every hole which the Germans dug to snatch a little shelter from the Allied bombardment, quickly filled. Tanks were embedded in the morass, and thousands of attacking Germans died under soil that shifted as they fell.

On the dykes above the floods was a number of houses. Each one of these was transformed into a block-house, and from it devastating bursts of firing came so long as ammunition lasted. Sometimes the Germans did succeed in getting a foothold on solid ground, but immediately they were counter-attacked, and thrown back into the marshes.

When constant reinforcements enabled the enemy to advance at tremendous cost to himself, the slopes of the dunes formed a further shelter for the indomitable defenders. These had happily been reinforced, by this time, by troops of General Prioux's army, which had succeeded in smashing its way through to Dunkirk. The arrival of every extra man was of great value in easing the pressure. Belgian troops, too, who had kept their arms, fought as men of steel in this last stand.

As the embarkation of the Allied troops neared its end, French infantry took over the whole of the defence, and while some of them continued to resist the Germans, others set about the task of rendering the port even more useless, if that were possible, to the enemy than their own guns and bombs had made it.

In this final resistance the discipline of the French soldiers was unshakable. It was almost impossible to make them break their military formations, and if, when their own turn came to be embarked, there was room for only half a company, the whole unit preferred to remain behind. They had almost to be driven to the boats by their officers.

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Towards midnight on Monday, nearly all the reserves of ammunition were exhausted. German tanks were nosing their way into the streets of the town itself. While

some of these last parties went to see what boats were left, their comrades closed against the German advance parties with hand grenades, rifle butts and bayonets, and those who had any shot left at all saved them for the enemy machine-gun nests which had been set up in houses not more than a quarter of a mile away. In the shattered harbour itself, British and French ships still lay in congested formation, waiting to take off the last troops.

Many supremely heroic deeds were done in those last hours. Douglas Williams, war correspondent of the *Sunday Times*, wrote of one, concerning a French skipper, which he described as "one of the finest examples of courage and indomitable spirit that came to my notice during the four days I spent watching the men come ashore at Dover.

"This French ship laden with rescued soldiers was waiting her turn to get out of the harbour. Near her lay a British minesweeper. Suddenly out of the sky came German planes, seeking to sink the ships by dive bombing. The French ship was hit by a direct bomb, on the deck. Dozens of men were wounded, others thrown into the water. The sweeper, working frantically with her whale boats, and regardless of the bombs which still rained down, picked as many of the men as she could from the water.

"Among them was the French skipper. His legs had been blown off at the knees, but as he lay on the sweeper's deck, covered with a blanket, he struggled to rise, and suddenly said in a strong voice, 'Vive la Marine Anglaise! Vive la Victoire!' He died in a few minutes."

When all their ammunition, carefully husbanded though it had been, was spent, when the French artillerymen had no more shells, and the French infantrymen no more bullets, the time had come at last for this heroic remnant to try to get away. Artillery officers ordered the destruction of their guns, among them the famous 75's which they had used so effectively to destroy enemy tanks at point-blank range. The infantrymen stuck to their tin hats and their rifles, but

to nothing else, and so in the chilly dawn of Tuesday morning they found themselves on the beach.

Bombs had disabled the only ships of any size that were left. Those who succeeded in getting away did so in rowing boats and motor launches, which they found abandoned. Few of them had any experience of handling boats.

On the launches, more often than not the engine broke down, and they drifted helplessly in the Channel. One of these launches, towing behind her a small boat, drifted for hours without food or water, and hoisted a blanket to the mast as a distress signal. They were adrift for 24 hours before being rescued by a lifeboat from the south-east coast, which had already saved three thousand troops from the beaches, and was herself without food or water.

Those in the rowing boats were not so badly off, for they had oars, and officers and men alike took turns with them during a nightmare voyage. Their chief trouble was that they did not know in what direction they were going. For all they knew they might have rowed for days without reaching a British port. Happily most of them were sighted by larger boats and taken into safety.

The very last of the French Army to get away were some 26 officers and men who were bombed and machine-gunned as they put off in a 40-foot fishing boat, but who none the less succeeded in reaching a port on the British coast many hours later, with a tattered and bullet-riddled tricolour still flying proudly at their mast-head.

Evacuation was officially said to be completed at seven o'clock on the morning of Tuesday, when Vice-Admiral Abrial was the last man to leave. His remarkable skill and gallantry in command of the Naval Forces at Dunkirk were not to go unrecognized. Two days later, having visited London in the meantime, he arrived back in Paris. There he was received by M. Campinchi, the Minister of Marine, who "in the name of the Navy" thanked him "for the page of glory" written by his defence of the entrenched camp of Dunkirk, and by the

aid he had given to the evacuation of the Allied Armies. The Commander-in-Chief of the French Navy, Vice-Admiral Darlan, invested him with the insignia of Grand Cross of the Legion of Honour.

Rear-Admiral Platon, the Governor of Dunkirk, was invested with the insignia of Commander of the same Order. Both admirals received the marked distinction of being quoted in the Army Order of the Day.

Of Admiral Abrial, it was said that "by his energy and imperturbable calm, by his sense of duty, and by his skill in command, he succeeded in repelling for five days the German attacks before Dunkirk, and in allowing the embarkation of the Allied Armies. He gave to all the finest example of sang-froid and heroism."

Admiral Platon, it was stated, "having been appointed Governor of Dunkirk in critical circumstances, magnificently assured the defences of the fortress till the end, by his quiet courage and firm dispositions. He only abandoned the post under orders, and at the very last, after all embarkation had been completed."

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At Westminster late in the afternoon of the day which had seen the evacuation ended, Mr. Churchill made an eagerly awaited statement. A packed House of Commons, having listened with some impatience to the routine business of the afternoon, received the Prime Minister with prolonged cheers. His account was both ample and moving.

He reviewed the whole course of the Allied fight in Flanders, paid his tribute to the desperate fights at Boulogne and Calais, and came to the point where with the Allied Armies in the North surrounded, pressed on every side by heavy attacks, and far outnumbered in the air, he had feared that it would be his hard lot to announce from the despatch box the greatest military disaster in British history.

At that time, only a week ago, he had thought, and there were good judges, he said, who agreed with him, that perhaps twenty or thirty thousand men might be embarked. But it certainly seemed that the main body

of the B.E.F. north of the Amiens-Abbeville gap, would be broken up in the open fields, or else have to capitulate for lack of food and ammunition. "Those," said Mr. Churchill, "were the hard and heavy tidings for which I called upon the House and the nation to prepare themselves a week ago. The whole root and core and brain of the British Army, on which and around which we were to build the great British Armies of the latter years of the War, seemed about to perish on the field, or be led into an ignominious and starving captivity." He went on to describe how the Germans had done all that lay in their power to bring such a situation about, how their Army, their artillery, their Air Force, their Navy, and their U-boats had concentrated on that one port which was left open to us, how nothing was spared, either in men or material, in the attempt to prevent evacuation, how vast masses of German infantrymen and artillery hurled themselves upon the ever-contracting appendix within which the Allied Armies fought.

He paid a tribute to the Royal Air Force, which struck not only from its advanced bases, but from its main Metropolitan strength, at the German bombers and at the fighters which protected them. Then he said: "The scene is clear. The crash and thunder have for the moment died away. A miracle of deliverance achieved by valour, by perseverance, and by perfect discipline, by dauntless service, by resource, by skill, and by unconquerable fidelity, is manifest to us all."

The Prime Minister went on to tell the eager House of Commons, in whose ranks there were serving members but lately returned from Flanders itself, how the retreating British and French Armies hurled back the enemy until he was so roughly handled that he did not dare harry seriously their departure, and then he gave the dramatic figure, the figure for which the whole nation was waiting. Out of the jaws of death, he cried, 335,000 men, French and British, had been snatched.

At this point he was careful to underline the fact that wars were not won by evacuations. After a further lengthy and inspiring tribute to the work of the Royal Air Force, he returned to the Army, which had been

fighting on three fronts at once, against such overwhelming odds. There were sympathetic cheers from every part of the House when he expressed the sympathy of all members to those who had suffered bereavement or were still anxiously waiting for news, but when he mentioned the figure of 30,000 only as our losses in men killed, wounded and missing, the House drew a deep breath. Grievous as this figure was, it was yet infinitely smaller than anyone had expected. Moreover, the Prime Minister pointed out that in the confusion of the fight it was inevitable that many should have been left in positions "where honour required no further resistance from them," thus emphasizing the point that those who were missing were not inevitably lost.

It was in the latter part of his speech that Mr. Churchill, having with the consummate skill of a true orator, worked his audience up to a pitch of enthusiasm, proceeded to hammer home the lesson of the Battle of Flanders. Let no one assign any attributes of victory to what had happened. That was his cry.

Our material losses were enormous: a thousand guns, all our transport, all the armoured vehicles that were with the Army in the North. Such losses would delay the expansion of our military strength. The first-fruits of all that our industry had to give were gone. With remorseless candour, sparing neither the House nor the nation anything of the truth, Mr. Churchill said, "What has happened in France and Belgium is a colossal military disaster." He proceeded to show why.

The French Army had been weakened. The Belgian Army was lost. A large part of those fortified lines upon which we placed so much faith was gone. Mining districts and factories of great value had passed into the enemy's hands. The whole of the Channel ports were in his possession, with all the tragic consequences which followed from that.

This was a speech of almost infinite value, because it restored to an emotionally grateful House and nation a true sense of perspective. That perspective was none the less unwavering for all its grimness. Mr. Churchill was ready to envisage a stern defence of our island home,

and a position even, though he did not believe this possible, where a large part of England and Scotland might be subjugated and starving, but he reminded the House of the solid assurances of sea-power and those which belonged to air-power if it could be established. He went further, and spoke of the unshakable determination, which would lead our Empire beyond the seas, armed and guarded by the British Navy, to carry on the struggle.

"We shall not flag or fail," he cried, "We shall go on to the end. We shall fight in France. We shall fight on the seas and oceans. We shall fight on the beaches. We shall fight on the landing grounds. We shall fight in the fields and in the streets. We shall fight in the hills. We shall never surrender."

It was a peroration which reflected almost exactly the feeling of do-or-die which had inspired the miracle of Dunkirk. After the nation had read this speech of its Prime Minister there was no one who could accuse him or his Government of complacency. Mr. Churchill was drastic and he was realistic, but those were just the qualities which were needed. A miracle could not always be expected to come to our rescue. It was only if the nation put forth its complete and undivided effort that it would safely ride out the storms. When Mr. Churchill declared, "We shall not flag or fail," he was taking up the unspoken slogan of the men in Flanders, which had carried them through from almost certain disaster to miraculous deliverance, and which if it were adopted by the whole nation, working in one great brotherhood with its Allies, would make ultimate victory not only possible, but certain and inevitable.

CHAPTER V

COUNTING THE COST

THE miracle had happened. The lost legions had been saved. A military exploit without precedent in history, for the scale of war in 1940 at Dunkirk exceeded that of Gallipoli, as greatly as Gallipoli itself exceeded Corunna, had been completed.

It remained to count the cost on both sides. In men, on our side, it was of course surprisingly small, because in the long series of very fierce battles, first on one front and then on another, and finally on three fronts at once, the numbers did not much exceed 30,000 killed, wounded, and missing. In material, however, our losses were enormous.

In the opening days of the great battle of March 1918 we lost nearly 100,000 men, nearly three times the number lost in Flanders in May 1940. But in guns, the figures were almost equal—nearly one thousand. In addition, all the armoured vehicles that were with the Army in the North had to be abandoned. Inevitably these losses meant a further delay in the expansion of our military strength. As Mr. Churchill said: "The best of all we had to give had gone to the British Expeditionary Force, the first fruits of all that our industry had to give, and they cannot easily be made good."

In the air, our medium bombers and fighters, who were almost continuously in action, suffered serious but by no means irreparable losses. The claims made in German communiqués of the numbers of Allied aircraft destroyed were, almost invariably, grossly exaggerated. In particular, our heavy bombing squadrons remained almost intact, in spite of the most intensive operations over enemy-occupied territory and also over Germany itself. Moreover, the crack fighter squadrons, which were temporarily transferred from the defence of London to the defence of the B.E.F. as it evacuated, suffered no serious inroads upon their strength.

On the sea, also, the losses sustained by the Navy and the supporting fleet of small craft, were comparatively small. The loss of three destroyers, *Grafton*, *Grenade* and *Wakeful*, the last-named being a veteran of the Great War, was announced on May 30. The Admiralty communiqué of June 3 revealed that three more destroyers, *Basilisk*, *Keith*, and *Havant* had also been sunk by enemy action. Of nearly 200 minor war vessels of H.M. Fleet, which were engaged in the operation, only 24 were lost. They comprised a mine-sweeper, a gunboat, an air arm tender, five paddle-boats converted into minesweepers, eight armed trawlers, three drifters, two armed warding-vessels, one buoy-laying vessel, and a tug.

It was typical of the fantastic exaggeration contained in the German bulletins that they officially claimed to have sunk a transport of 15,000 tons during the operations off Dunkirk. No such ship, of course, could have got anywhere near the scene of embarkation.

Three hundred French warships and merchant vessels of various sizes, with two hundred smaller boats, as well as numerous formations of the Naval Air Arm, took part in the operations. Seven destroyers, the *Jaguar*, *Chacal*, *Adroit*, *Bourrasque*, *Foudroyant*, *Ouran* and *Siroco* were lost, and the supply ship *Niger* as well. Most of the crews were saved.

The *Adroit* and the *Niger* were lost in the early operations off the Channel coast, before the evacuation of Dunkirk. The *Siroco* had distinguished herself earlier in the war by destroying three U-boats on various occasions.

Other ships were damaged, but were able to put to sea again in a few days. The French Admiralty announcement said bluntly that the "success of such an enterprise inevitably entailed the sacrifice of a certain number not only of Naval but also of Air units. The crews themselves also realized it, and did their duty as a matter of course."

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It was the loss of the pleasure steamers while serving as Naval auxiliaries that brought home the dangers and

the heroism of the withdrawal from Dunkirk to hundreds of thousands of people all over England, who had spent holidays on the south and east coasts, and had taken many an enjoyable and uneventful trip on board them. The *Crested Eagle*, for instance, was a part of London itself. As she came up the Thames at dusk of a summer's evening, her rows of shining portholes were one of the most famous of river sights. She was the first Thames paddler, built after the Great War, and her original run was between London and Thanet. Of late years, however, she had run up the coast as far as Clacton. She cost £80,000 and was the fastest paddler on the river, as well as one of the most luxurious boats of her type in the world. She ran on oil fuel, the first of the London excursion fleet to do so. During the Coronation in 1937 she was used as a floating grandstand, and thousands of people saw the procession from her as she lay moored close to the Embankment.

The Brighton white-funnel fleet suffered heavily too. *Waverley*, *Brighton Queen* and the *Brighton Belle* used to take passengers in happier days from the Palace Pier to Boulogne. The *Gracie Fields*, which was sunk also, was launched by Gracie herself at Southampton. Until she went to Dunkirk her most exciting adventure had been when a flying-boat crashed into her in Southampton Water last summer.

Wilson Midgley wrote the epitaph of these brave little boats that helped to save an army: "Their very names should have made them safe. They sound as harmless and friendly as a row of boarding houses. They were not built for bombs and blood. For them the salt sea air was tempered by the softer aromas of bottled beer and shrimps. In the days of peace these maiden ladies of the beach were tidied up and fettled by the sailors if there was a rope out of place or a splash on the decks. Now they lie torn, twisted, dumped in mud and sand, wallowing with a cock-eyed gaze at the smoke-laden sky. We have all made jokes in the past at them, and with and about their crews, but their last voyage has wiped out all that. Made for pleasure, they toddled bravely into misery and ruin. Like many an old lady who has

dropped her frills and flounces, they picked up dignity when they turned from entertaining to life-saving."

To the tune of the "Spanish Ladies," one might sing:

"Farewell and adieu to you, fair and Brighton ladies,
Farewell and adieu to you, sunk in the main.
You bravely took orders to sail for old England,
We'll never see you down at Brighton again."

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Sad and grave as the Allied losses were in the Battle of Flanders, they were as nothing compared with those of the enemy. Nazi announcements of 10,000 killed and 40,000 wounded were fantastic understatements. Authoritative calculations issued from London fixed the figure as between 400,000 and 500,000 from the time the drive through Holland and Flanders began to the final occupation of Dunkirk.

Though the organization of the German mechanized units, both as regards maintenance and supply, was admitted to be extraordinarily good, their losses in tanks were tremendous.

The German pioneers, whose efficiency in erecting pontoon bridges across the rivers was remarkable, suffered very heavy casualties in the performance, and such losses of highly skilled men could not readily be replaced.

It was further estimated that in the advance across Flanders the Germans used, with complete ruthlessness, more than twenty infantry divisions, and there were significant indications that the enemy casualties were much greater than had been anticipated. It was found necessary, for instance, to requisition in Germany, at short notice, a great many buildings as hospitals. Moreover, if the German figures of 10,000 killed and 40,000 wounded had been correct, there would have been no point in the warnings broadcast from time to time to the German people that heavy casualty lists must be expected.

The Navy inflicted considerable losses upon the submarines and motor torpedo boats, which attempted, largely without success, to hinder the evacuation from

Dunkirk. It was noticeable that none of those who made the dangerous journey across the Channel had anything to say about U-boats. Yet this was exactly the sort of operation in which submarines would have been particularly useful.

There were only three possible ways of accounting for the absence of submarines. Either our protective devices were astonishingly successful in keeping submarines at a distance, which in view of the dispersal of the rescuing vessels and the lengthy period during which they were at work, seems improbable. Or the German High Command failed to appreciate the opportunity which that brave but almost defenceless Armada of ours afforded them, and this again, in view of the undeniable skill both strategic and tactical which Berlin had shown until then, seems unlikely.

The third and only remaining reason was that the German submarine fleet had not yet recovered from the severe drubbing which it got at the hands of our warships and aeroplanes in the earlier months of the war.

The most spectacular German losses, however, were in the air. It seems that in the Dunkirk area alone something like 1,500 aircraft must have been employed. Their losses were at the rate of over fifty a day, and these must have had a very serious effect on the enemy's reserves in that element. Not only did the German Air Arm fail in its task of preventing the evacuation, in spite of being able to concentrate on one point whereas the R.A.F. had a hundred and one other jobs to do both at home and overseas, but it suffered the loss of a great many first-line crews.

This is a more important factor than the loss of the machines themselves, for while no one doubts that the production of the German aircraft factories is colossal, there is no reason to suppose that they have unlimited reserves of the highly trained men who alone can be expected to stand up to the intensive conditions of modern aerial warfare. It was perhaps significant that in the first days of the great German attack on the French line of the Somme and the Aisne in the first two

weeks of June, dive bombers were very much less in evidence.

As an instance of the deterioration in the enemy's flying personnel, there may be quoted the case of the Dornier forced down near one of the aerodromes of the Advanced Air Striking Force at the beginning of the second week in June, whose gunner was a boy of fifteen years old. Moreover, although in the early stages of this new battle our fighter squadrons were still out-numbered, in many cases by more than five to one, they managed to shoot down a great many enemy machines without suffering any but the smallest losses themselves. This suggested that not only in quantity but in quality also the losses suffered at Dunkirk by both sides were on balance extremely favourable to us.

The result of the air battles over Dunkirk were as much of a triumph for our Air Force as the smashing advance across Flanders had been for the German land forces.

CHAPTER VI

THE HOMECOMING

"In brief, a braver choice of dauntless spirits
Than now the English bottoms have waft over
Did never float upon the swelling tide."

SHAKESPEARE, *King John*.

WHEN people living on the south-east coast heard that the Army was coming back from Belgium, all those who could made their way up to the cliffs to watch for their arrival.

In the brilliant sunshine, the English Channel, as smooth as a pond, looked like the scene of a gigantic regatta. There were so many boats, and such a variety of types, that the sea at times was black with them. For all their oddness, they seemed to the observers on the cliffs to share an air of jaunty pride. Nearly all were flying the Red Ensign, and many had guns cocked up on their sterns.

It was the biggest boats, of course, that had suffered most, and the destroyers as they sailed into port did not present that spick and span appearance of which the Navy is so proud. They were battered and torn and crippled, but their decks were crammed to fullest capacity from bow to stern, and their firing stations were nearly always intact.

Destroyers and auxiliary craft alike lost no time in disembarking their passengers. Gangways were run up and the men tumbled off without ceremony. From the smaller boats they often waded ashore. There was a good reason for this urgency. Men were still waiting on Dunkirk beach.

As the Army stepped ashore, grimy, unshaven, hungry, there was a tremendous welcome for them. A.R.P. workers in their blue overalls stood ready to take over from the sailors the task of looking after the wounded. In emergency operating theatres men whose wounds demanded immediate attention were treated before being taken to hospital trains. For those in

greatest need of it there was the blessed relief of the morphia syringe.

And ordinary folk with no official standing and no definite job to do were not to be out-done in kindness. For the people in these ports and seaside resorts, 1940 was not a happy year. The height of their season, when they reckoned to make their living for the twelvemonth, was almost upon them, and their streets and beaches were empty of visitors. Deck chairs flapped dejectedly in the breeze, waiting in vain for patronage. Sticks of rock and comic postcards lay forlorn, together with all the other souvenirs, in the shop windows. Behind the boarding-house curtains, with their sauce-bottle sign, lay a desert of white table-cloths.

And then, instead of families in flannels and flimsy frocks, instead of bathing beauties and "mashers," and children with buckets and spades, there suddenly arrived the strangest summer visitors that these towns had ever seen. Yet how glad they were to see them!

Landladies and shopkeepers, the men who collect tuppences, and the men who take photographs, the attendants from the fun-fairs, and the barmaids in the pubs, one and all turned out and forgot their own troubles in the job of being able to do something for these weary and battle-worn men. When the call went out to the people of one town to throw open their homes to give rest and shelter, the queues of volunteers were so long that the officials were quite unable to cope with them.

They raided their pantries, and rigged up quayside canteens. They stripped their beds of blankets and sheets. They bought chocolate, and cigarettes, and cake, and thrust them into the hands of the soldiers. But one of the things that the men wanted most was bread. It did not matter if it was only plain bread, without any butter. They had not had any for days. White bread and brown bread alone meant a meal to them.

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It was not a beaten Army which came back. The men were still singing, and full of pleasantries. They stepped ashore with their heads high, though their eyes were

heavy with weariness. In spite of all that they had been through, there were few of them that had not brought back their full kit, heavy as it was. They had their rifles, and a few clips of ammunition. Some of them even staggered under the weight of a Bren gun. Their cry was "Thumbs up! We're O.K."

From many, of course, that was a brave exaggeration. For all their brown skins and burliness, for all their cheerful talk, they were footsore to a man, and many were in rags. Some tramped stiffly off in their stockinged feet; some were in their shirt-sleeves; a few had not even a shirt to their backs. Some had torn trouser-legs soaked in blood: others had their arms tied up in a scarf. Their tin hats were scored with bullets.

Yet, however dishevelled they were, and however lacking in essential clothing, there were few who did not still cling to some favourite possession or to some souvenir. One man had a doll sticking out of his pocket that he had picked up in a Belgian street after a toy-shop had been bombed. Another had salvaged his piano-accordion, and played it as he came on to the quay. A third had a child's stained bucket dangling from the muzzle of his rifle.

Other souvenirs were of a grimmer kind—a piece of shell that had just missed them, or a bullet which had hit their tin hats, a German officer's sword, an enemy bayonet, a Nazi revolver.

Some of the troops had brought dogs back with them, and came ashore with pathetic little noses poking out of their tunics. Most of these animals had found Dunkirk in the empty desolation of its last days a terrifying place to live in, and had found their way down to the crowded beaches, where they made friends with the soldiers, such friends, indeed, that they trotted behind them when they were embarking, or swam out to the small boats and mutely asked to be taken aboard.

There were big dogs as well as small, pedigrees as well as mongrels, some setters and spaniels, a good fox-terrier or two, and even a shepherd dog. The soldiers would have liked to have kept them and taken them to their homes. But the laws of quarantine are no less

strict in war than in peace, and only one of the several hundred that were gathered on the quays was destined to escape kindly destruction at the hands of the R.S.P.C.A., one small black puppy for whom a boatload of British soldiers had taken such a liking that they agreed to pay its keep through six months' quarantine.

But of all the souvenirs there was none stranger than that brought home by a rather bewildered soldier. A baby which he had found in Dunkirk. He heard a child crying as he ran through the street, which was strewn with corpses. It was lying by its mother, who had been killed by bullets from a German plane. He picked up the baby out of the gutter, tucked it under his arm, and was hurried on board a ship before he had a chance to ask anyone to look after the child. All the way back to England he had dandled it on his knee, and rocked it when it howled.

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Mingled with the arrivals at one port were several hundred German prisoners. If any confirmation were needed of the suggestions made by the returning B.E.F., that the German Army had exhausted itself by its terrific push towards the sea, and had been roughly handled by the retreating Allies, it was to be found in the bearing of these men. Unlike the returning British troops, and unlike, too, most of the airmen who had been shot down and become prisoners, and whose behaviour was noticeable for its arrogance, these men, pale, miserable and half-starved, hung their heads in deep apathy. Most of them were young, and few of them were good physical specimens. They were given refreshment, and sent on to internment camps by special train.

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For a good many of the returning troops the greatest need was a wash. They were soaked with salt-water or with oil, from being flung into the sea on the way over. Perhaps the most striking proof of their good spirits was that they were ready and even eager to talk. Their first word almost always was one of praise for the Navy, and of the other brave people who had risked their own

lives to fetch them home. Their second almost as invariably was: "If only we had had more planes!" and their third: "Give us a day or two, and we'll be ready to go back." They were filled with a cold fury against the Germans for their wanton slaughter of the civilian population of Flanders. The callous way in which the Germans had machine-gunned women and children, had inspired in them a determination to revenge the death of the innocents.

"Man for man, we have the Jerries licked. They were off like rabbits when they saw a bit of steel," one said, and another, who had twenty machine-gun bullets in his leg and side, shouted from his stretcher: "I'm not hurt much. I want to get back." A west-countryman, patting his bayonet, said: "They say steel improves by being put in the fire. This bit of mine ought to be tip-top by now."

Some men of the Camerons had discovered a new argument for keeping the kilt as battle-dress. According to their tale a Scottish battalion in the rear-guard action made the enemy run in terror by suddenly confronting them in kilts.

About the ordeal on the beaches at Dunkirk they were reticent. It was too close and too horrible for them to want to do anything but forget it. But even so they told of how they had cheered every time a Bren gun brought down a German bomber, how they had hidden "like rabbits" in the dunes, and how, as they put it, many of them had had "a good swimming lesson" on the way back.

They were generally agreed upon three things: that the dive bombers' attacks were the worst, though actually they did much less damage than the machine-gunning; that the Fifth-columnists were everywhere extraordinarily active; and that there was something of almost insane desperation in the way in which the Germans attacked, no matter what the cost. Some of them who had handled Bren and Bofors guns, spoke of being physically sickened by the numbers of Nazi infantry they had mown down.

Officers paid high tribute to their troops.

One corps commander said: "I have had opportunities of witnessing British troops over a long period of years both in war and in peace, and I have never seen them behave in such an exemplary manner. My admiration of the British soldier was never higher than it is to-day."

Another officer said: "The troops are in wonderful condition. They are full of guts. It is no exaggeration to say that they would go back immediately after a couple of days rest."

The first words of a brigadier, on stepping ashore at the head of his men, who had been in the midst of the fighting from start to finish, were: "We led the advance into Belgium; we fought in the rear-guard from the farthest front reached by the B.E.F. to the gates of Dunkirk. On one day we marched more than forty-eight miles in twenty-four hours. My men never once gave way. They beat back every German attack. Each time they retreated it was when ordered, and only as far as ordered."

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Women were among those who were landed from Flanders, members of the A.T.S., nurses, and Y.W.C.A. workers, who had done their job as gallantly and as calmly as the men.

One of the soldiers' heroines in this war is already established. Some of them call her "Sweetie-Pie," others "Copper-Nob." Her real name is Gutteridge, and she comes from Yorkshire. That is why perhaps she prefers "Copper Nob" to "Sweetie-Pie" as a nickname, because "Copper-Nob" is good Yorkshire. In fact it is what her father and her brothers, of whom four are in the Army, used to call her. Until a few weeks before, Sister Gutteridge, who is only 24, and scarcely five feet high, was moving about the quiet wards and tiled corridors of a provincial hospital. She exchanged them for the battlefield.

The soldiers liked this quiet girl, with the North-country accent, who came among them in charge of a mobile unit of the Army Nursing Service. They admired her when they saw how nonchalantly she took to being under fire, because, as so often happened, the Red

Cross on her ambulance seemed to attract undue attention from the machine-guns of the German Air Force.

Hers was a tremendous story. When the B.E.F. began to retreat she was at an advanced post by herself, nursing four officers in an ambulance. All the rest of the hospital unit evacuated, but she had no time to notice it. Finally she and her orderly, a Newcastle miner, set off with their four patients just as a motorized unit of the Nazis came into sight down the road.

It took the ambulance four and a half hours to cover thirty miles, which was cluttered with refugees and with British troops. It was bombed again and again, and machine-gunned as well; when, at one place, Sister "Copper Nob" got out of the ambulance to fetch some morphia from a Red Cross tent, the bullets dented her tin hat. She was still clutching that tin hat when she got back to England.

After a series of adventures, the ambulance reached a port. The hospital ship they had gone to meet had been bombed and sunk. They went on to the next port, and discovered that again the hospital ship there had been attacked from the air. So they transferred to a French armoured train which was full of wounded, and crawled along for a whole day and night, continually attacked by bombs, but mercifully were never hit. Finally, after six days, they reached a third port and embarked the wounded officers.

Even then her adventures were not finished, for as she was going on board the ship herself she saw a wounded man lying by the quayside, and tore up her nurse's cap to make emergency bandages. While she was doing that a German bomber went over, with machine guns going at full blast.

The Y.W.C.A. workers had an almost equally exciting time. They had been sent out to organize some social centres for members of the A.T.S. and of the military nursing service. Hardly had they got the building ready before air-raids began, and for days they were under bombardment from the air. One of them said: "It was the first time that we had been under fire. But it wasn't so bad as I'd expected. In fact, after a time we got

quite used to it," and the other one said, "Sometimes we went into the cellar, but one night we were in bed when a terrific blast nearly threw us out. We looked out of the window, and found that the house next door had been blown to bits. Our place stood up to it. Good solid walls are a marvellous protection."

The same woman had what she called a "good tip" for motoring along roads that were being bombed. "The only cars to get through," she said, "were those with mattresses on their roofs."

Both women had horrifying tales to tell of the frantic state of a great many of the refugees. One man passed them in a car, which was riddled with bullets. He had set off with his wife, three children and a nurse. On the way the children and the nurse were shot dead, and his wife, out of her mind, had jumped from the car. "That man had only one purpose in life, after that. He *had* to get to the place in France where he could join his regiment. I have never seen anything more terrible than his cold, staring eyes."

Both paid high tribute to the good heart of our troops in the retreat. "However tired they were, as soon as we said 'hullo' they perked up to hear an English-woman's voice, and were as cheery as you could imagine."

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"I'd always wanted to spend a holiday here," one soldier laughed when he came ashore at a famous seaside resort. But the saving of time and the getting of the first boat-loads away from the ports was vital if more were to be saved. Sometimes it was not even possible to serve any meals or refreshments to the B.E.F. at the ports where they disembarked. This was not due to disorganization, as some supposed at first. Quite the contrary. If trains were held up for one unnecessary minute, it meant congestion and delay, a reduction in the volume of traffic, and a smaller chance of saving the lives of men who were still across the Channel.

So these men, who had not known what sleep was for days on end, though their feet were blistered and their eyes still smarting, though their throats were

parched and their stomachs were empty, recognizing the necessity of haste, formed their ranks, and marched away briskly to their trains, to the tune of "Roll out the Barrel."

Full arrangements, however, had been made to provide refreshments at wayside stations between the ports where they were disembarked and the stations to which they were proceeding.

Each of the separate railway journeys to London, and there were hundreds of them, was a triumphal progress. Everywhere the people in the villages and the farms had come down to the line to cheer and wave their flags. Members of the home defence battalions guarding railway bridges and electrical sub-stations, had chalked up messages of greeting. Sometimes these little knots of country folk got a surprise when they saw pair after pair of trousers hanging out of the window. The soldiers were taking an opportunity of drying out that salt water!

They had come back to an England which was never lovelier, back from the horrors of war and the inferno of Dunkirk to bluebells, still to be glimpsed amid the bracken, to the red campion and yellow archangel in the spinneys, and an abundance of bloom in the meadows and the hedgerows, and in the very railway cuttings themselves. They had come back, for a day or two at least, to peace, and to plenty.

The village stations where they stopped for food were piled high with loaves of bread, with trays of meat pies, with plates of jellied eels, with tins of sardines, and with crates of apples and oranges, and cheeses. There were hard-boiled eggs and hot sausages by the thousand. Lorry after lorry rattled up with its huge boxes of sandwiches, and its great milk cans filled with hot tea. Just as soon as each crowded troop train steamed to a halt, into the windows went loaded trays, and cigarettes and matches as well.

Men of the R.A.S.C. and civilian volunteers worked hand in hand to feed the Army at its "first stop," and it was not long before the platforms of these quiet little stations which had never seen or imagined such activity,

were stacked high with empty tins, and cans, and cases.

Cricket matches, tea parties, garden fêtes, flag days, sales of work, all the hundred and one typical country activities were postponed while this urgent job remained to be done. At some stations it lasted day and night for a week, and the excitement of finding themselves at the heart and centre of the last stages of one of the greatest battles in history, spurred these rural populations to undreamt-of energies.

The R.A.S.C., too, got little or no rest during all this time, but they were equally ready to sacrifice their sleep, their meals and their comfort, because they knew that every time they saw a trainful of fed and contented soldiers draw out, it was making room for another, and every fresh load meant more lives saved.

So the B.E.F., or the greater part of it, came back to London. At suburban junctions there were fresh stops, not long enough for the suburbanites to arrange a proper meal, but long enough for them to say "Thank you," and "We're proud of you," to the grinning faces that filled the windows, and hid the sprawling bodies of their more weary comrades, who lay with their heads on their arms, fast asleep on the dining-tables of restaurant cars. There was time enough to push baskets full of fruit, and mugs of beer, and bananas, and more cigarettes, through the windows before the trains pulled out. Nobody minded if they did not get the baskets or the mugs back.

As the men looked out of the window upon the London they never thought to see again they could hear the thin cries and cheers of children in the grimy streets below, who had got to know, as children will, the why and wherefore of what was happening. They were cheers which brought the tears to the eyes of many a man at the window. But for those who looked on at these unforgettable scenes there was no more moving moment than that at Waterloo when some of the men were changing trains, and crowds had gathered to cheer them. A party of soldiers marching through the station had been singing to a mouth-organ, when they saw a party of men of the R.A.F. going by. As one man, they stopped singing, and cheered. It was a simple but a very genuine

tribute to the Force whose courage and daring had done so much to bring them home safely.

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Many people shared in this great homecoming, and none had a greater responsibility than the railway companies. The rapid and orderly movement of the troops to their camps and clearing stations in various parts of the country constituted one of the most spectacular feats in railway history. It had not all the romance which attached to the exploits of the Little Ships, but it involved an enormous amount of planning and labour in which all the main line companies co-operated.

Never has the knowledge and experience which the Superintendents of Operation on the main systems have of handling large masses of people, been put to such a severe test, or to one of more vital importance. These were excursions the like of which had never been seen before.

The main organization fell upon the Southern Railway, who at six hours' notice had to arrange for continuous transport from seven ports. In order that there might be a steady supply of rolling stock, a call was sent out to the other companies who readily agreed to pool their available trains. Forty trains were lent by the Great Western, 44 by the London, Midland and Scottish, and 47 by the London and North Eastern, and when these had been sent each company said they were ready to provide more if more were needed. In eight days 620 trains, most of them of considerable length, were added to the ordinary time-tables.

At the peak period 200 trains left the ports in 48 hours. Just as there had been no time to arrange elaborate schedules for embarking the troops at Dunkirk, so it was not possible to give any working notice of the new arrangements other than by word of mouth. In complete secrecy, but with great speed, trains were moved down to the coast, and their every movement was controlled by telephone. Railway officials and military authorities worked side by side.

Engines were changed when they reached the Southern system, or if there were no Southern engines available, a pilot was put in charge of the cab, so that the driver's lack of experience about the particular line on which he had to run should not cause any delay.

At a matter of fact, as civilian travellers attested at the time, there was remarkably little interference with the normal traffic. When there were any delays, once the reason for them became known, there were no complaints. There was not a single engine failure or mishap of any kind, though drivers and guards were inevitably working extremely long hours.

The astonishing thing was that this was a particularly heavy period for the railways in any case. There was an extra number of coal trains being moved, and these were not slowed down in any way. Seventy specials were run at the week-end to transfer evacuees from South and East to West. There were also additional workmen's trains, and during the same period the evacuation of livestock began in certain areas. Of all the mass movements undertaken by the railways in their history, either in peace or in war, this was one in which the care and accuracy which are the British railway tradition were most urgently and strenuously needed. These qualities did not fail. Nor did organized labour, which showed its patriotism by working 24 hours a day.

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Nobody who came back from Dunkirk was more welcome in Britain than those who came last of all—the French. They were survivors for the most part of the terrific rearguard action fought by General Prioux's Army. The British public had, by the time the poilus arrived, learned something of that action, and were eager to show their admiration and their affection.

There was a strange misunderstanding at one port when they first arrived, for though they were obviously hungry they refused the food which was held out to them. An interpreter came along, and the willing, would-be hosts asked him to inquire what was the matter. With many gestures and emphatic words the

Frenchmen made their explanations. At last, the interpreter succeeded in getting in a word edgeways, and after a minute or two they began to smile, and advancing eagerly, took the food which was still waiting for them. The interpreter said: "They said they would not rob the starving women and children in England. It seems that the Germans have been dropping pamphlets among the French troops, telling them that we have no food over here. Perhaps it is just as well that they came to see for themselves."

It was a good thing that they came, not only because by doing so another of Goebbels' propaganda lies was nailed to the mast, but also because it gave the British people a chance to show that the unity between themselves and France, a theme which had earned many fine words and eloquent speeches in recent months, was something more than that, something real, a part of common experience.

The poilus had not been in England long before they won their way to everyone's hearts, and before they themselves realized just how much they and their courage and their gaiety were appreciated. They were anxious men, as well as tired, and most of them wanted news of their relations and friends, news which was one of the few things that they could not have from England. Yet they found time to smile, to sing, and to smoke unceasingly from those "paquets bleus," of which, though they had lost almost everything else, they still seemed to have an inexhaustible supply in their pockets.

One of them indeed had brought back something more substantial than a packet of cigarettes, and no doubt it was a friendly gesture on the part of the immigration authorities which allowed him to bring it with him to London. It was a goat, a regimental mascot.

But the poilu who found himself in charge of it was not its proper keeper, and at one small suburban railway station in South London some excitement was caused when this man, jumping out of the train as soon as it stopped, ran down the platform crying out in broken English: "Is there one can milk a goat? Mimi needs milking."

No one can make friends more quickly than a Frenchman, and in the few minutes which was all that these poilus had at the suburban stations before their trains moved on, many a mushroom romance blossomed between the gallant if somewhat stubbly French soldiers, and the girls who were handing up oranges and chocolate. They were inarticulate romances for the most part, consisting of gestures and pats and smiles, and they ended when the train blew a shrill blast and the Frenchmen had to clamber aboard.

Then they tore off anything they could lay their hands on for souvenirs, and threw them out of the windows as their trains moved out—buttons, ribbons, pom-poms, crucifixes, blouses, even sweaters, were thrown on to the platform with grand Gallic gestures; and anything that the girls had got to throw back they threw, crying "*A bas, Hitler!*" a slogan they had quickly learnt, and also "*Vive la France!*"

And even though there were not many on the platforms who knew the words of "*La Marseillaise*," they all knew the tune, and they sang it lustily over and over again as one train succeeded another.

Tradition has personified Britain as a man and France as a woman, but they are not immutable figures. To those who saw a bearded poilu bend and gently kiss an English lass on the brow, in a suburban station on a sunny June morning, there was something touchingly symbolic in the act.

CHAPTER VII

"THE INNER VICTORY"

"High, high above the clouds,
Against the setting sun,
The fight was fought,
And your great task was done."

MAURICE BARING, *In Memoriam*, A.H.

THE history of British arms has nothing to show more gallant than the record of the Royal Air Force in the Battle of Flanders.

It is, indeed, an epic. The word is often and loosely used to describe military encounters, but on this occasion it may properly and exactly be applied to the exploits of our crews in the Advance Air Striking Forces, in the Air Component, in the Coastal Command, and finally in the Home Fighter Command itself.

They were exploits in the heroic tradition. They form a series of events which are worthy to be the subject of a latter-day Iliad, a dazzling and glorious concentration of courage, and they were in line with the national conception of gallantry as it emerged from the centuries which lie behind.

To read and hear of a mere handful of our planes taking on massive formations of enemy machines, not as one isolated instance but time and time again, and emerging victorious, is to remember that the acceptance of adverse odds has always been something in which our fighting men take a pride. The young men taking off in their hundreds from the plains of France and Flanders, in support both of the B.E.F. and of the French Army, were the spiritual heirs of Elizabeth's sailors who tackled and trounced the proud Armada of Spain.

Across the Channel, separated from the scenes of desperate fray by a distance that grew ever narrower, the whole country watched and listened with transcendent admiration. Such valour lifted us one and all out of our own affairs and petty forebodings.

The supremacy in any medium is never ultimately won by sheer brute force or mere preponderance of numbers. There was something in 1914 which was called a "contemptible little army." Now as then it is human quality, not mechanical quantity, merit and not mass, which are the supreme test and the final arbiter of battle.

For eight months the youngest of the Fighting Services had waited patiently for its chance to earn battle honours. From the moment that Hitler invaded Holland and Belgium the great hour of the R.A.F. had come. Action was demanded, action which was virtually continuous and undoubtedly the heaviest ever known off the ground, and to this call the R.A.F. responded with brilliant skill and indomitable vigour.

The task was a diverse and exacting one. In the first place, our fighters had to co-operate with anti-aircraft units in parrying repeated German bomber attacks on our air-fields and air-bases. In the first stages of the campaign the enemy raids hardly ceased from dawn to dusk. No sooner had the "All Clear" sounded than the wail of the "Alarm" began again. Yet the watchfulness of the reconnaissance units, the speed into the air of the Hurricanes and their elusive skill in battle both with the Dorniers and the escorting Messerschmitts were such that while the enemy suffered heavily, he was able to do comparatively little damage either to hangars, machines dispersed on the ground, or personnel.

On the contrary, so warm was the reception accorded him, both from the ground and in the air, that he was forced to jettison thousands of bombs which fell harmlessly in fields and woods instead of on their target.

It was most encouraging to find that the Hurricanes proved so successful in their first great trial of strength, because they are machines which can be easily and speedily built in very large numbers. It was indeed the confidence which they had in their craft which enabled the fighter pilots to establish their ascendancy.

One story of a fight over a base of the Advanced Air Striking Force will surely go down to history. A young ferry-pilot had just flown a Hurricane over from England, and had hardly got out of his machine when

the sirens began their wail, and six black dots in the sky resolved quickly into a fleet of Heinkels. The ferry pilot's engine was still running. He clambered back into the single seat, and cried "Stand clear!" In a moment he was off, turning and climbing at tremendous speed, and in another moment all his eight guns were in action. One of the Heinkels crashed. The others made off.

The ferry pilot came back to earth, got out with a grin, and officially handed over the plane. To the Commander he said: "I'm sorry not to deliver any ammunition, but I *did* cut out the middleman, and delivered it direct!"

Then, of course, it was the duty of more of our fighters to act as escorts to the B.E.F. as it advanced across Belgium. The speed and efficiency with which that advance was achieved were due in no little measure to the effectiveness of the vigil overhead. Some of the ace pilots were given roving commissions instead of working in strict squadron control, and were thus left free to perform individual feats of daring.

Indeed, one of the remarkable features of the air fighting has been that the "dog fight" of the last War, the tussle between plane and plane in single, mortal combat, has survived into this war of mass. The turning in a small circle which was characteristic of the old bi-planes is not possible with modern machines, and when steep vertical turns are taken at several hundred miles an hour a momentary "blackout" has always to be reckoned with, but it was soon very clear that the manoeuvrability of our machines was much greater than that of the enemy.

In particular, the Messerschmitt 110, which first began to appear in the sky during March, and in which the Germans placed great faith, proved unwieldy to handle, in comparison with our own machines.

Many of the fights over Flanders in the early part of the campaign took place at great heights. Action at 30,000 feet was not uncommon, though that meant the use of oxygen, and the attendant disadvantage of queer behaviour on the part of the plane. Strange things happened to men's minds at these heights. One of our

pilots was wounded and had his engine set on fire, and thought it time to come back to earth.

By chance he disconnected his oxygen mask and at once lost consciousness. When he came to he was in a cloud, and he said afterwards: "For some minutes I thought I was in heaven! But when the machine fell below the cloud I realized I had still got to come back to earth." He dropped in No Man's Land and was fired on by German patrols, and almost by French as well. He managed to make himself known to the latter, and they helped him home to fight another day.

Another very vital part which the R.A.F. had to play in Flanders was to harry the German mechanized columns in their dangerous thrusts. The hammering which the Blenheim bombers, with Spitfires as escort, gave the enemy forces was from the very beginning relentless, and for the first time the Germans got some of the medicine which they had given to the Poles and Norwegians. Exhibiting the same tirelessness as the fighters, the Blenheims, with their high speed and fine power of manœuvre, again and again blasted columns of the enemy to a standstill, and by their low diving attacks caused tremendous havoc and disorganization.

The proportion of hits was far greater than the most optimistic of our air chiefs had expected. The confusion of battle seemed to be no distraction to our pilots. Despite a hail of bullets from motor machine-guns and small calibre anti-aircraft guns, they proceeded in one raid after another to drop their load as coolly as though they were engaged in peace-time practice.

Both the 'stick' and 'pattern' methods of bombing were found to yield good results. The first involves the release by one bomber of its missiles at regular intervals in a straight line of flight, and is particularly useful for attack on comparatively narrow columns of troops. The second method is used when a largish target is to be straddled. Several machines, flying wing-tip to wing-tip, drop their bombs at the same instant. This method was employed satisfactorily in the destruction of bridges and petrol dumps.

It was one of these squadrons of bombers whose duty

it was to hinder the German advance, which provided material for perhaps the outstanding example to date of communal valour in this war. It happened after this fashion: every bridge across a certain stretch of the River Meuse had been blown up except one—at Maastricht. Over this heavily fortified structure, German tanks and armoured units were pouring in a steady stream.

Bomber squadrons of the R.A.F. had made no fewer than eight attacks on it. The banks of the river had been shattered by high explosive bombs. Anti-aircraft batteries mounted at the bridge heads had been smashed to pieces, but on the bridge itself no direct hits had been scored.

Tanks, supplies of petrol and ammunition, troops, and all kinds of stores continued to cross over.

Back at the headquarters of this particular bomber squadron, the commanding officer sent for his pilots. They stood at attention in the hangar while he looked down at them from the eminence of a board placed across a few petrol tins, looked down rather sadly and said: "Gentlemen, that bridge must be destroyed. I ask for volunteers."

To a man the pilots present took one pace forward. The commanding officer decided that to draw names out of a hat was the only way to settle the matter. So they all wrote their names down, each on a slip of paper, and put them inside a R.A.F. cap. The commanding officer drew five slips out.

The five captains of the aircraft destined to go on this death-or-glory ride chose their crews and took off without further delay, escorted by fighters.

They came to the bridge, round which the enemy had by this time gathered a formidable array of anti-aircraft guns. They dived low and released their loads, swept on, wheeled and came back. Great clouds of smoke followed the explosions. Then, as they rolled away, the massive masonry of the bridge was seen to be slowly crumbling. Pier after pier fell into the river with a mighty splash, carrying with them the traffic which was continuing to press across.

The Maastricht Bridge had fallen, and so, riddled with anti-aircraft bullets, had four of the five bombers whose crews had sworn to get their target at whatever cost to themselves.

Out of the five crews who had won the honour of taking part in this desperate exploit only one man came back alive.

The first sequel came a few days later when the squadron concerned received a four-word message from Gen. Georges of the French General Staff. It ran: "*Messieurs, je vous remercie.*"

The second was some time later when it was announced that the King had conferred the Victoria Cross on Flying-Officer B. E. Garland and Sergeant T. Grey, "in recognition of most conspicuous bravery."

Garland was the pilot, and Grey the observer of the leading aircraft of the formation, and the Air Ministry bulletin announcing the awards stated "much of the success of this vital operation must be attributed to the formation leader, Flying-Officer Garland, and to the coolness and resource of Sergeant Grey, who in most difficult conditions navigated their aircraft in such a manner that the whole formation was able successfully to attack the target in spite of heavy losses. Flying-Officer Garland and Sergeant Grey did not return."

The final task of the R.A.F. during the Battle of Flanders fell to the heavy bombers, who hitherto had been almost exclusively engaged on reconnaissance flights. Now they were called upon to put to good use the knowledge of German territory gained from personal observations and from the camera during those expeditions which to the British public had often appeared irritatingly fruitless. As it turned out, the information gained during these reconnaissances was of inestimable value in striking at what Mr. Churchill so graphically called "the tap root of German mechanized power."

* * * * *

The rapidly increasing ascendancy of the R.A.F. over all units of the German Air Force with which it came into contact, and the gradual dispelling of the bogey

that the German Luftwaffe was invincible, can clearly be traced in a closer examination of the aerial combat and aerial activity which followed the invasion of the Low Countries.

Perhaps the most spectacular feat of the early stages of the war in Belgium was a devastating attack made in daylight by our Blenheims on a mechanized column no less than five miles long. In order to attack this mass of small tanks, armoured cars and motor transports, our machines, on approaching, broke formation, dived from a great height to within a thousand feet of the ground, and went into action first of all with bombs and finally with machine-guns. The bombs tore great craters in the road, dozens of vehicles were piled up in hopeless confusion, and by the time the last Blenheim had swooped through the hail of fire, to drop further bombs on this havoc of damaged cars and overturned transports, the whole column had been stopped, and the road completely blocked.

Not content with this, our machines returned at an exceedingly low altitude to mow down the hastily fleeing German infantry with their machine-guns.

This kind of raid, although possibly more successful than some, was typical, in its thoroughness and in its daring, of the support given to the Allied Armies by our medium bombers, of whom a French newspaper a little later said: "They went into combat as if to a football match."

Heavy though their tasks were during these early days when the battle on the ground was hardly joined, the dive bombers were not by any means the only units busily engaged. Our fighters were patrolling the sky by day. Our reconnaissance planes were continuing their dangerous and infinitely important job of observing and informing their fellows of the movements and dispositions of enemy forces. The heavy bombers, by night, had begun to cross the border into Germany, laden with something more than leaflets.

As early as the 15th the biggest raid of the war was made, and it was to the Rhineland that our Whitleys, Wellingtons, and Hampdens went. Each bomber had

a specific target. All the targets had been chosen during the months of reconnoitring trips. Any machine which missed its defined objective had instructions not to bomb indiscriminately, and it was a fact that, although a great deal of damage was done, quite a number of machines returned, according to orders, with their loads intact.

This was an example both of great discipline and of commonsense, since the haphazard loosing of bombs is a wasteful as well as an uncivilized operation. The heavy bombers on this occasion were assisted not only by their detailed knowledge of the district, but by brilliant moonlight which enabled them in most cases to make several separate runs at varying speeds over their road and rail targets.

Three nights later the storage tanks at Hamburg and Bremen, from which the enemy was drawing the major portion of his oil supply, were attacked for five hours by our bombers, who destroyed several depots and heavily damaged a number of others. On this occasion the technique employed was to keep up a continuous bombardment by relays, whose numbers were comparatively small.

When they came back, and luckily on this occasion they all did, the pilots told vivid tales of their experiences. They spoke of flames so high that "one could have seen to read the smallest print at ten thousand feet," of a pall of smoke spreading over a town "like a huge black mushroom," of a barrage of anti-aircraft fire which "might have been coming from several hundred hosepipes." One pilot said he circled for five minutes before dropping any of his load, "to be certain that I had arrived at the right address."

These and other similarly graphic descriptions confirm the growing belief that the art of simple narrative which has long been considered the prerogative of the Navy has been inherited by the Air Force as well.

Sunday, May 19, was no day of rest for the R.A.F., who continued to bomb not only the oil refineries in north-west Germany, but also concentrations of railway stock south of Brussels, while the matchless courage of the fighter aircraft was shown as much by their eager-

ness to come back, refuel and take off again all day long, as by their splendid behaviour in the air itself. This busy day was the forerunner of a busy week, the busiest any section of the R.A.F. had known, and one in which all types of Command had plenty to do.

Blenheims continued to harass and disorganize long columns of mechanized units, and to bomb and destroy the roads and bridges which lay in the path of their rapid advance.

A full moon continued to aid the Whitleys and the Wellingtons, whose crews, now that the Germans had progressed so far into Belgium, were discovering a countryside which, twenty-three years ago, had become familiar to the young pilots of another generation.

Not only Germany and Belgium, but Holland too, since it was now in enemy hands, were necessary objectives. At Rotterdam the vast oil repositories were so successfully set on fire that the yellow glow could be seen far out to sea. Our aircraft, as they banked steeply over their target, were almost scorched by the leaping flames. Despite a terrific barrage of shrapnel and 'flaming onions,' the only damage done to the raiders was to the tail of one of our machines, and that was slight. The pilots came back with an eerie story of seeing, as it seemed to them, half Holland lit up by a fantastic and brilliant blue glare, when the oil refineries which were one of their targets caught fire, one after the other, and exploded.

Back in Northern France, where the R.A.F. was being called upon to lend assistance to the gallant but outnumbered 'Armée de l'Air,' the same embarrassment from which our ground forces were suffering met our medium bombers also. So rapid had been the enemy advance that they had caught up, intermingled with, and sometimes even passed the streams of refugees, and because our men still honoured those humanitarian principles which the enemy had long discarded, they did not dare under such circumstances to let loose their bombs.

Nevertheless, when the objective was clearly defined, they proceeded to create chaos among the armoured

lorries and the closely packed light armoured vehicles of the enemy. Among the opposition met now was that of rapid fire from pom-pom guns mounted on mobile platforms. None the less the R.A.F. losses continued to be surprisingly small.

The proportion of three enemy planes down or damaged to one of our own, which had been established at the beginning of this intensive phase of combat, had by now risen to four and even five.

As the week went on and the situation on the Flanders plain became increasingly serious, the R.A.F. kept up their inexorable pressure. It extended from Rhenish Prussia down to the southernmost parts of Belgium. Supply trains were wrecked, marshalling yards were blown up, bridge after bridge was seen to collapse. Regardless of danger, bombing runs over targets lit up by slowly descending parachute flares, were succeeded by low-level machine-gun attacks.

The navigator and bomb-aimer of a Hampden told a great story, on his return, of scoring direct hits on an ammunition train, which blew up with such force that the aircraft high above was rocked to and fro.

"We were about two thousand feet up when we first saw the train standing in a yard," he said. "We made a level attack, dropping four high explosive and four incendiary bombs. Immediately there were flames and an explosion, and then the whole train just went sky-high."

The bomber pilot of another Hampden, which attacked two supply trains at standstill a few miles east of Liège said: "First of all I did a steep left-hand turn to get a good view of the train. Then I dropped another thousand feet so as to let go my parachute flare. This lit up the target for about three minutes. We then turned and did the first of six successive runs over the longest train. The first bomb landed on the right bank of the line. The second was a direct hit on a rear truck. the third landed on the left embankment. I then decided to drop two bombs together. Both of them crashed through the centre of the train. There was a terrific blast of smoke and flame. We dropped another para-

chute flare to see what had happened. It pierced the cloud of smoke and dust and showed us wreckage lying all over the place."

While the main pressure of our heavy bombing forces was directed to the rear of the Belgian battlefield, and the westernmost part of Germany, isolated machines penetrated deep into enemy territory. A power station near Leipzig, nearly three hundred miles from the French frontier, was riddled with bombs one night in a raid which completely took all the defensive forces by surprise.

In the meantime, our fighters continued to win spectacular victories in the teeth of vast numerical superiority. Many a member of the B.E.F. crouching in a ditch or under a hedge, was cheered to see Junkers, which had been devoting their attention rather too closely to him and his mates, hedge-hopping in a desperate attempt to escape the avenging Spitfires.

Naturally these fighter triumphs were not obtained without loss. But one of the dramatic and heartening aspects of this part of the air war was the tendency of pilots and gunners who had been given up for lost to turn up again days late after many an astonishing adventure, very little the worse for wear, and eager to take to the air as soon as a new craft could be found for them.

The story of the pilot who escaped by parachute when his machine caught fire over Holland, having brought down three Germans and been attacked by no fewer than twenty-seven Messerschmitts, was, if slightly more elaborate than some, in other respects not unusual. He landed among tall reeds on an island, and swam two channels, each of which was about a hundred yards wide, to a house on the mainland, which was empty. He found a small boat, however, and rowed some few hundred yards until he came to a high dyke. This he climbed, and saw another house, from which a labourer and his wife emerged, and were persuaded, with some difficulty, of his friendly intentions and his nationality. The farm hand took the oars and rowed the officer to another island.

Arrived there, they picked up a bicycle and took it in turns to pedal towards the nearest Dutch military post. Here, to his delight, the pilot found a fellow member of the R.A.F., who had been in the same raid, and who had also had to take to his parachute. They were taken to another and more important post, where the Intelligence officers were less ready to be convinced that they were British. It was small wonder, considering the number of German parachutists who had dropped in false uniforms. In any case the British pilot by this time had lost most of his uniform!

After some time he and his companion were marched to yet another boat and taken to a town which had just been bombed. At police headquarters they found an officer who could speak good English, but did not believe that they were English because they could not speak Dutch! So on they went to more military barracks, and to more questioning by another Intelligence officer. This one took them off by car, but on the road they ran into a motorized column of Dutch soldiers who searched the party and discovered that the Intelligence officer who was their escort was a notorious Fascist for whom they had been looking. At this point the two British officers gave up all hope, and thought they would be shot out of hand. Luckily, however, they managed to establish their identity at the last moment, and were eventually permitted to take a boat which happened to be bound for England from the nearest port.

The stoicism and resourcefulness which have proved to be most marked among the qualities of our Air Force were illustrated over and over again in the stories which these young men told when they got back to their squadrons after having been given up as lost. For instance, there was the pilot who on a bombing expedition behind the German lines had his hand almost shot away, but, refusing to return, unloaded his bombs on a railway crossing, and was finally forced to land in No Man's Land owing to loss of blood. The observer and the gunner pulled him from the controls, set the machine on fire, and carried the pilot into the woods. Here they

encountered patrols, whom they heard speaking German. They took to their heels and finally found refuge for the night in a deserted farm.

The sergeant-observer had brought some morphia from the stores which were on the bomber, and thus enabled the pilot to get some sleep, so that the three of them were able to proceed in the morning to a river bank. Seeing French troops on the other side they shouted across, but from the unpromising reception it was clear that they were being taken for Germans. They propped the exhausted pilot up against a tree, and one of them went down the river bank until he found a bridge which had been demolished. He came back; they set off again, and crossed the river by climbing the broken struts of the bridge, half-carrying the wounded pilot all the while. Here they were found by American ambulance men. It was nearly forty-eight hours since their forced landing.

Another young pilot who was shot down borrowed some clothes from a Belgian civilian, and while the two of them were walking down a road they were caught up by a column of tanks. To the pilot's horror he saw they were German tanks, but did not attempt to run away, and they rumbled by. A little while later he came across one of them resting by the wayside. With almost incredible bravado, he strolled over to the Nazi crew, and in his best French suggested that they might give him a lift, as he was feeling rather tired.

They must have been rather sympathetic Nazis, as well as very ingenuous ones, for they accepted him as a Belgian, and agreed to give him a ride. For twenty miles he crouched inside the monster, feeling rather like Jonah inside the whale, for he had none of the protective devices which tank crews have to prevent them from bruising themselves in the confined space.

At length, when they decided to have another rest, he left them, thanking them politely, and made off on his own. He discovered a small estaminet where there was still good wine to be had, and here he was resting, congratulating himself on the success of his cheekiness, when some German infantry arrived. The owner of the

estaminet kept them in conversation at the front while the pilot escaped through the back window. This time he had to walk, and it was a long time before he got back into the British area.

When he did do so, he found himself regarded with grave suspicion. His Belgian peasant clothes by now were very much the worse for wear, and the officer before whom he was taken apparently thought that, in spite of his excellent English, or perhaps because of it, he was a spy. Eventually he was taken to the headquarters of the Air Component, where the A.O.C., who luckily knew him by sight, was able to vouch for him personally.

Over Belgium a flight-lieutenant was attacked by six fighters. His engine was holed, and he had to land. Some peasants came up and he explained rather haltingly that he wanted them to help him cover his craft, but they understood very readily, and with boughs of leaves and long grass, and anything and everything else that was available, they successfully camouflaged the plane. They had just finished doing this when the German fighters flew overhead. The peasants and the British pilot threw themselves in a ditch, and the Germans apparently did not see them, for they flew away and did not return.

When the pilot was able to examine his craft, he saw that there were only two small holes in the engine. He borrowed some petrol and some motor oil from the owner of a car in the neighbourhood, and bought a packet of chewing-gum at a little shop. This he used to plug the holes, and it was a tribute to the gumminess of the sweet that it set very well.

In a short time the pilot decided to risk going up. The camouflage was removed, a peasant helped him to swing her, and off he went, back to his base where he had been marked down as 'Missing.'

One pilot who came to grief in German-occupied territory had the narrowest shave of all. He was arrested, and shut up in a courtyard full of Belgian civilians. At intervals of about half an hour groups of these were ordered out, summarily questioned by a particularly brutal German officer, and shot without more ado.

During a pause the officer in charge of the firing squad said, "It will be your turn soon."

The pilot protested that he was an officer in uniform. "Bah! You are a spy like all these others," said the German.

The pilot looked desperately around him. There was a small glass window which gave on to the courtyard. What was on the other side of it he did not know. But waiting until the departure of the next group of civilians caused a temporary confusion, he took a flying leap through the glass.

He landed on all fours, with blood streaming down his face from the flying glass. He was in a road. He was able to run, and run he did, round a corner and out of sight. Eventually he found his way back to his squadron.

* * * * *

As the grim struggle developed on the Flanders plain the R.A.F. put forth its utmost strength to relieve the pressure. One night Dusseldorf, Dortmund, Hamburg, Bremen and Cologne were all bombed without loss to our squadrons, and the story of what one heavy bomber did in half an hour is typical of the scope of the achievements of our machines at this peak of their effort.

In this short space of time, the machine scored direct hits on a mechanized column travelling down a main road near Brussels, extinguished one searchlight by bombing it and put another out by machine-gun fire, wrecked a railway station and a bridge, and finally demolished a machine-gun post on top of a hill by direct hits from three salvoes.

Typical too of the spirit and brilliant skill of the fighter squadrons was the occasion on which fourteen Hurricanes took on twenty Messerschmitts and twenty Heinkels, shot down nine of them, badly damaged two, and chased another until it was almost inevitable that it would crash. All this was done without loss or even damage to one of our planes.

In a battle between two Coastal Command aircraft and three Heinkels, off the Belgian coast, the pilot of

the leading R.A.F. machine manœuvred his aircraft until he had both the first and second Germans in his gun-sights. As he flew straight towards them, he let them have a long raking burst of fire, saw his tracer bullets go through, over and under the first Heinkel, and enter the second. The nearest one staggered, with one wing-tip tilting downwards, and appeared to go out of control, and the same burst apparently killed the gunner of the second German machine, for there was no further firing from that plane—an up-to-date example of the old phrase about killing two birds with one stone!

Small wonder was it that at this time Mr. Duff Cooper, in a broadcast to the Empire, said: "In calmer days it will perhaps be recorded that the men of the Royal Air Force—men from far and wide in the British Commonwealth—saved France and England and all that they held precious from the disaster of defeat."

A list of awards issued by the Air Ministry at the end of the month of May gave point to the Minister of Information's reference to the part played by officers and men from all parts of the Empire. Among the air aces who were honoured with D.S.O.s, D.F.C.s and D.S.M.s were men from Lahore, the Straits Settlements, Ceylon, Calcutta, Winnipeg, British Columbia and Shanghai. Many of them had been in the most prosaic of peace-time jobs—as shop assistants, insurance clerks, electricians—before they had come from the ends of the earth to join the R.A.F. and to discover in themselves new qualities of courage, coolness, and leadership.

Of one squadron leader invalided home the Air Ministry stated: "It was in fact necessary to restrain him from flying again after his aircraft had been shot down and he had landed by parachute." Of such was the mettle of the men of whom Duff Cooper spoke.

Fine as had been the achievements and tireless the heroic work of the bomber and fighter squadrons in the earlier days of the Battle of Flanders, it was during the great retreat that they were called on to display the fullest measure of courage and energy. While the bombers still continued their raids upon railways in Germany itself, because even a moderate amount of

damage there might mean important repercussions right up to the front line, while the hard-worked fighter squadrons with bases in France continued their splendid and deadly activity, the bulletins at home began to give us new names. We heard, almost for the first time, of Defiants, of Battles, of Hudsons, and of Ansons—supplementary names in one of the worthiest Honours List of all time—as the whole weight of our aerial fleet was employed in throwing up a screen beneath the cover of which the B.E.F. might with greater hope continue its rearguard action. Even the crack squadrons of the Metropolitan force, whose duty it was to guard London, were sent to thicken and spread this protecting screen.

Vast odds in these hectic days became a commonplace. Three Hudsons of the coastal command on June 1 cheerfully took on a fleet of forty bombers. Three of the enemy were shot down, two dived out of control, two others were severely damaged. The Hudsons, unharmed, calmly continued their patrol.

Machines of the Fleet Air Arm scored signal successes in the bombing of fast motor torpedo boats which the Germans had brought up to the Battle of the Ports. Then, swinging inland, they wrought havoc with spectacular dives from 10,000 to 2,000 feet among the motorized columns, the troops, and the ammunition trucks of the enemy. Even the lightly armoured Ansons, built only for reconnaissance, with superb audacity engaged Messerschmitt fighters between Calais and Ostend, fought them fifty feet above the sea, sent two down to the bottom of the Channel and disabled two more, without loss to themselves.

It was indeed a glorious first of June for the R.A.F., which in that day had a record bag of 78 machines between dawn and seven o'clock at night. The scene of battle by this time had moved to the air above the beaches and fens surrounding Dunkirk itself, and here it was, while our troops by the thousand, the ten thousand and the hundred thousand were being embarked, that our Air Force, combining and collaborating with the French, attained their summit of success. They did, in those hours, incredible things with incredible

coolness. Their skill matched their bravery. Not only was the German nonsense about race superiority blown out of the skies, but thanks to these men, whose actions seemed like that of a new and superior race, the almost unbelievable success of the embarkation beneath them was assured.

There was much in the exploits of these days which might confidently be taken as earnest of future victory, but nothing stirred the blood of the British people more or gave greater satisfaction to the technical experts than the performance of the latest fighters, Boulton-Paul "Defiants." In one day a squadron of twelve of these—the first fighters to be equipped with power-controlled gun turrets—shot down 38 German aircraft, and brought their total bag for three days up to at least fifty. All this was accomplished with the single loss of a gunner, who, overestimating the extent of the damage done to his machine, jumped with his parachute into Belgian territory while the pilot brought the craft home successfully.

The individual episodes were no less exciting than those which had gone before. There was the pilot of a fighter who, having exhausted his ammunition, instead of streaking for home, got on to the tail of a German bomber, and so stunted his plane that the Nazi pilot lost his nerve, tried to turn too steeply, and went crashing to the ground without a single shot having been fired at him.

There was the enthusiastic young man in a Hurricane, whose plane was disabled and who landed on the beach near Dunkirk. He walked 15 miles, carrying his parachute, into Dunkirk itself, got a lift to Folkestone in a paddle steamer, re-joined his squadron and was out on patrol the next day.

On one occasion, a formation of six Hurricanes was on patrol over the sea, off the South coast of England, when the leader suddenly spotted a German Henschel 3,000 feet below. He spoke into his radio telephone to one of the accompanying pilots:

"Hullo, hullo. There is a Hun below you. Go and deal with him."

Without a word the pilot left the formation and dived. He made straight for the Nazi aircraft below, sent a few hundred rounds of ammunition into it, and saw it go down in flames to the sea.

Then he climbed back to rejoin his flight.

Once again the squadron leader's radio telephone spoke: "Hullo, hullo. Did you get my message? Did you get my message? Over to you."

Back came the laconic reply from the successful pilot. "Your message received. Your message received . . . and understood. Over to you."

* * * * *

The criticisms uttered by the men of the B.E.F. who returned home and said that they had never seen our planes certainly underlined the urgent necessity of increasing production so that we might establish at least a parity of numbers with the enemy. But it was difficult for that hard-driven body of men to appreciate the higher purpose of the war in the air while they themselves were being bombed incessantly.

It is impossible, taking the larger view, to have anything but the profoundest admiration for the performances of our aircraft over this critical period. It was necessary above all for our fighters to engage the escorts to the German bombing squadrons, in order that the enemy's wastage of aircraft and trained crews might be increased. The force of the German assault would inevitably have been much greater if by day the Allied fighters had not pitted their strength against Messerschmitts and Dorniers alike, and if by night the storage depots from which the Germans drew their precious fuel had not been heavily and almost incessantly bombed.

There is no doubt that in these massive and bitterly contested combats the R.A.F. established an ascendancy over its more numerous opponents. To say that the Germans met more than their match is an understatement. In aerial combat not once but a hundred times we established mastery, and neutral correspondents with the German Forces and in Germany itself

have given accounts showing how devastating was the havoc which our bombers worked on the ground. However numerous and however formidable the German Air Force may have been at the beginning of the Battle of Flanders, by the end its strength was riven and its confidence rudely shaken. Imperishable pages were written in the Imperial story during those days, and the Empire's sons, who shared the honour and the agony of the vast assaults, and who are still in the air, were fittingly commemorated in the words of Mr. Churchill when he told the House of Commons that the "miracle of deliverance" achieved in Flanders had for its most shining glory the "Inner Victory" which was gained by the Air Force:—

"The Knights of the Round Table, the Crusaders, all fall back into the prosaic past—not only distant but prosaic. These young men going forth every dawn to guard their native land and all that we stand for, holding in their hands these instruments of colossal and shattering power, of whom it may be said that

'Every morn brought forth a noble chance,

And every chance brought forth a noble Knight,'

deserve our gratitude as do all of the brave men who in so many ways and on so many occasions are ready, and continue to be ready, to give life and all for their native land."

CHAPTER VIII

BOULOGNE—CALAIS—ZEEBRUGGE THE LESSER EPICS

WITHIN the larger heroism of the Battle of Flanders there were magnificent isolated incidents which threw into high relief the enterprise, the endurance and the contempt of death which were displayed by all three of our fighting services throughout the campaign. The three most spectacular of these incidents each centred in a port. Dunkirk was not the only familiar name to be inscribed on the roll of British battle honours when the fierce combat had burned itself out.

Boulogne was the first of the Ports to meet the full fury of the Nazi onslaught. Even before the mechanized columns had forced their way through the gap between Amiens and Arras to threaten the coast, Boulogne was being fiercely bombed from the air. William Forrest, who had been a war correspondent in Spain, Poland and Finland, before he went out with the B.E.F., described the last days in Boulogne, in a broadcast to the Empire, as "like a chapter from one of those Wellsian fantasies of horror piled upon horror which we used to regard to as divorced from all reality."

Everything that he had seen in those smaller wars was eclipsed by these experiences. At nightfall everyone took to the cliffs or to the cellars, and cowered there while the bombers came over, wave after wave, insatiable in their lust for destruction. Hapless civilians were gripped by terror and panic, but the British and French soldiers stationed there carried on with their defensive preparations with astonishing coolness.

When the tanks arrived on the hills outside the town, the defenders replied gallantly with such guns as they had. The Germans gradually closed in on the town with light mechanized vehicles and motorized field-guns, but every road was blocked and barricaded with lorries and protected with machine-guns, which did

great damage. As the German land forces moved up, the supporting aircraft did not confine themselves any longer to night raids, but attacked throughout the day as well.

Sometimes the sky seemed darkened by their vast numbers, but more than once they scattered before a much smaller group of R.A.F. fighters.

The Germans were able to bring up enough reinforcements to surround the town completely. The main Allied armies found it impossible, therefore, to send field guns or other assistance. It was realized that the beleaguered troops could not hold out indefinitely against these droves of mechanized vehicles. Small parties of Germans were already coming down the streets on the outskirts of the Basse Ville, before the decision was made to shorten the defended semi-circle by a slight withdrawal. This was done so that the flank could not be turned, and that when the time came for evacuation, as come it must, the men could be got off more quickly.

British and French destroyers were already just outside the harbour, fighting a long-range battle with the tanks and artillery which the enemy had established in the hills surrounding the town.

A demolition party, consisting of seamen, marines, and a small detachment of engineers, was embarked at the main jetty which was still comparatively free from bombardment. Their job was to hold the railway station, to fit demolition charges, and to ear-mark all bridges, cranes and lock-gates which might have to be destroyed. They did all this at the request of the French authorities.

Some troops had just arrived at the railway station when it suddenly came under high-explosive shell fire from enemy field guns. The seamen, many of them young men who had never been under fire before, carried calmly on with the job of fitting detonators to their explosive charges. Part of the roof and walls of the station were destroyed; casualties occurred; the men who were left carried on without flinching.

As enemy pressure increased, and incidentally was aided, as so often throughout this whole campaign, by

the work of Fifth Columnists, the Allied naval and military authorities conferred, and came to the conclusion that the town could not be held. The Germans already occupied the higher ground of the Haute Ville, with its ancient ramparts, and thus commanded the harbour. Every hour they massed more troops and guns. It was decided to demolish all bridges and other important points, and small parties of seamen went out under fire with their parcels of explosives. So rapid was the enemy advance that the swing bridges which gave access to the inner harbour were under fire from machine-gun nests only a few hundred yards away. None the less the explosives were placed by the bridges, and our troops continued their orderly withdrawal.

In another part of the harbour there was a large crane with a wet dock beside it, containing a naval trawler. The officer commanding decided they must both be destroyed, together with the power house and pumping-station for the dock, without delay, as they might be made use of by the enemy. The crane, however, did not fall as expected, and the destroyer alongside the jetty fired several rounds to finish it off. All the time the Germans were closing in, and some snipers had advanced to within fifty yards of the crane when it finally crashed.

While strong resistance was offered to these forces, another naval party was searching the docks for any ships which might help in the final evacuation. They found one small drifter, in which some stokers raised steam in record time by using bits of packing cases and anything else that would burn that they could lay their hands on. The fire and bombing continued.

Then came the order: "Complete demolition." The floating dock behind the landing quay, which was originally excavated for the flotilla of flat-bottomed boats with which Napoleon hoped to invade England, was sunk, and so was anything and everything else—power house, machinery, dock gates, another trawler, another crane—that might be of use to the enemy. In the midst of this hurried work the demolition parties were continually harassed by dive bombers and machine

guns. Further charges were placed in position to make certain of the sluice gates and bridge. Still the Germans advanced. Evacuation was urgent.

Two destroyers came into the harbour and alongside the jetty, and steamed stern first out of the narrow entrance with all the troops that could be packed on board. Three more destroyers took their place. These were furiously attacked by enemy field-guns on a hill overlooking the harbour to the north, and by pom-poms and machine-guns in the second story windows of a hotel. The range was no more than eight hundred yards. Then several heavy tanks came down the hill and on to the foreshore.

Meanwhile the troops were continuing to embark under a tornado of fire, their courage and bearing being magnificently maintained. The destroyers were continually on the offensive. All their guns were in full action, plastering the hillsides and the German field guns concealed there at point blank range. They blasted the hotel opposite until the pom-poms and machine-guns were silenced. The tanks too came in for a heavy bombardment, and those that were not put out of action retreated. It was the marksmanship of the gunners on these ships which alone enabled evacuation to take place at all.

Getting out of the harbour called for the most skilled seamanship. The tide had gone out. One of the ships was on fire. All of them were loaded to capacity, and even beyond it. When evening came our troops were still moving across the only remaining bridge into the railway station, and not until they were all over did the three naval officers and one rating retire, who had stayed behind to place demolition charges and who now blew it up.

When night fell, there were still great numbers of troops waiting to be evacuated. Regardless of the dangers involved, more and more destroyers forced a passage into the harbour to take them off. By morning, the great majority of the troops were saved.

The naval eye-witness who described the operation said: "It is a story of truly magnificent discipline, and

of courage, determination and devotion to duty on the part of comparatively small forces of the Army, the Navy, and the Royal Marines, which should be remembered long after we have passed into oblivion."

* * * * *

The glory of Boulogne was that of a withdrawal carried out with great orderliness in particularly difficult circumstances. The glory of Calais, on the other hand, was that of holding fast against overwhelming odds. From Boulogne the Guards came home. From Calais only a handful of the "spare time" soldiers who defended it got back. The story of Calais was a story of a fight to the death. A British detachment, three thousand strong, was hurriedly sent over from England to hold Calais "to the end," and to maintain communications with the B.E.F., when it was seen that the German drive threatened the French port closest to our shores. By the time they arrived the enemy's mechanized forces were already surrounding the port in such great strength that they were unable to carry out the full plans.

However, the men of the Rifle Brigade, 60th Rifles, and the Queen Victoria Rifles, with a battalion of tanks, and a thousand Frenchmen by their side, stayed where they were, and for four days kept the German hordes at bay. They contested every street, every house, every corner, until at last they were forced back into the old citadel which Vauban had built three hundred years before.

Great efforts were made to reinforce this valiant garrison, but enemy fire was too intense for ships to draw alongside.

Squadrons of the R.A.F. Component, however, flying with great daring were able to supply water, ammunition and hand-grenades to the garrison by dropping them from the air.

First of all, water was taken. Each aircraft was loaded with two containers which were fitted into the bomb rack. Each container carried ten gallons, and

was fitted with a parachute that opened automatically as soon as it was released from the aircraft. As dawn was breaking one morning, two squadrons, each of ten aircraft, left with the water aboard. They encountered heavy fire. One of the later machines was lost, and most of those behind the leaders were hit several times.

When they passed over the citadel, they dived as low as 50 feet in order to make certain of their aim. They passed right over their "target" and dropped the water in the centre of the citadel. The bombardment by German guns never ceased for one moment, and after one pilot had dropped his water supply, his aircraft was hit, and dived into the ground.

Shortly before noon on the same day, the operation was repeated, but this time the planes, which were carrying small-arm ammunition and hand-grenades, were accompanied by dive-bombers. While the other planes were carrying out their mission, these bombers created an unpleasant diversion over the German positions by dropping *their* loads.

In all, 39 of our aircraft were concerned in this operation, which undoubtedly brought great relief to the garrison and enabled them to hold out longer.

Nevertheless, the time came when the very gallant brigadier in command was called upon to surrender and given an hour to decide. With quiet confidence and with grim determination he spurned the offer, and it was four days before silence fell upon the citadel. Thirty unwounded survivors were brought off by the Navy. So far as is known the rest fought grimly till they died.

Their lives were not laid down in vain, for at least two armoured divisions which otherwise would have been turned against the B.E.F., already hard-pressed in the north, had to be sent to batter at Vauban's fortifications.

In that time the waterlines outside Dunkirk were flooded, the French had time to fight their way through from Lille, and it is no exaggeration to say that the sacrifice of the 4,000 of Calais, a sacrifice as willingly offered as that of the six burghers who handed their lives

to Edward III to ransom the town from destruction centuries before, meant that Dunkirk was kept open and the evacuation of the B.E.F. made possible. There was no Queen Philippa to plead for the lives of these men. They desired no intercession, and accepted none. Their continued refusal to surrender must count among the most heroic deeds in the annals of the British Army.

At least 1,000 of them had been territorials, and until September of last year many were salesmen behind the counters of the fashionable West End stores. The original Queen Victoria's Rifles came from the big drapery shops in Kensington, Knightsbridge, and Oxford Street, and the tradition never died. Early in 1939 one battalion had been turned into a mobile motor-cycle unit, and was for a time in training in the South of England. When called upon in the special emergency, these men embarked for France as an infantry unit, and left their motor-cycles behind them. When they got there they proved that the man behind the counter, the suburbanite with his striped trousers and stiff collar, had the stuff of the hero in him. These regiments have long been the pride of London. Their battle honours take up three pages of small print in the Army List. When Calais is added to those honours, it will surely shine out of the page in letters of gold.

* * * * *

Among those who escaped from Calais was an officer who had actually been captured by the enemy, and a rifleman who saved his own life because he risked it for that of a wounded comrade.

The officer was among the first of those to reach Calais from England. For several days he and the rest of the city workers and shop assistants who formed the bulk of the rank and file of his battalion, withstood constant dive-bombing attacks and increasing pressure from the land. During one attack of 54 dive-bombers on British headquarters, the houses around and most of the cars in the streets were destroyed. The signal section, however, continued to send and to receive

messages, until finally the German infantry broke through and surrounded a body of British troops.

The officer and some of his men were taken prisoner, and moved to a nearby church where they remained under guard. Then they were compelled to begin a long march inland, still strongly guarded. They marched for three hours without a halt; and then the officer noticed that there were no Germans near him.

The column came to a fork in the road. It went down to the right. He went down to the left, and no one saw. He put a considerable distance between himself and the enemy, and then took refuge in some bushes, where he slept until morning. Then he abandoned his greatcoat and helmet, and throwing a sack over his shoulder, set off across the fields for a long walk to the coast. He took the sun and the wind for guide, reached the coast near Cap Gris Nez, and on the beach saw, to his delight, a small white dinghy with two oars. Some French civilians gave him beer and bread, and at nightfall he set out to row across the Channel. An enemy searchlight on the Cape itself continually swept the surface of the water. It seemed as though he must be discovered. Every moment he expected to hear the rat-tat-tat of machine-guns. But his white dinghy passed unnoticed and he crept out of the danger area. After twelve hours of hard rowing he found himself half a mile off Dover. There he was seen and picked up by a British ship.

The rifleman, who belonged to the Queen Victoria's, was sheltering in a doorway while the town was being bombarded, when he saw an officer lying wounded and fully exposed to bullets from the Nazi planes. He ran out into the road and brought the officer to safety. When the raiders had passed he took him to the spot where a casualty station had been. It was no longer there.

However, he succeeded in half-dragging, half-carrying the officer through the town to the pier-head, where a small British merchant vessel was lying. Every available man on board was rendering first-aid to the wounded. A naval officer put the rifleman to the same

work, and the next thing he knew was that the ship had put off and was at sea.

* * * *

The name of Zeebrugge is imperishable. The sublime exploit of Sir Roger Keyes and his ship in 1918 can never be forgotten. When those obsolete cruisers steered past the most withering gun-fire into the Bruges Canal, and were sunk across the fairway, the most dangerous enemy submarine base of the last war ended its career.

But the Navy's feat in the latter stages of the Battle of Flanders, in the last days of May 1940, was hardly less daring, and certainly not less effective. On May 25 a first expedition was made, with the object of sinking a pair of ships on the canal lock sill. The Belgians, however, had already sunk a dredger there, and the canal entrance was partly obstructed. When the Navy made its first attempt the three block ships arrived on the spot as arranged, but a thick haze lay over everything, and they ran aground at the seaward end of the Channel inside the famous Mole. The demolition parties were taken off and the expedition withdrew.

It was decided, however, to make a second effort twenty-four hours later, with two fresh block ships. German reconnaissance aircraft spotted them as they approached the harbour, and radioed a report to their bombers, who came up and dived repeatedly over our ships. They kept going ahead, but at one time it seemed as if the bad luck of the day before was to be repeated. The steering gear of the leading block ship broke down. For a time she was out of control, and had to be taken in tow by a small ship, so that she could be kept in the Channel. In the engine-room the staff worked feverishly at repairs. In less than half an hour the helm was working again and the block ship proceeded up harbour.

She was actually in position, lying across the lock gates waiting to be sunk, when the electrical circuit failed, and there was no explosion. The cable, it

seemed, had fouled the ship's propeller. There was no time to extricate it. An emergency circuit was set up in a very short time, and this time the ship sank at the best possible angle inside the approach to the lock.

All this time squadrons of Heinkels were zooming overhead, dropping their bombs and diving to machine-gun the flotilla. Only the heaviest fire which the ships outside the harbour could put up, drove the raiders away.

Even then the mischances of the night were not over. The second block ship ran into the dredger which the Belgians had already sunk, and it was some time before she could be refloated. Ultimately, however, she too was taken up to the lock gates. The demolition charges were fired, and she sank neatly across the bows of the first wreck. The entrance was closed. The job was done.

Then came a desperate boat-race between the skeleton crews of the block ships, back to their escorts, from the lock gates, down the channel, and outside. Such was their skill with the oars that the fastest university crew would have been hard put to it to keep abreast of them! As they went past the Mole, some Belgians who had gathered there jerked their thumbs excitedly in the air. It seemed that their intention was to indicate great success, and when all the reports were made to the Admiralty their verdict agreed with that of the Belgians.

The blocking of the canal, it was felt, should delay the Germans from using Zeebrugge as a base for at least several months. Even if the block ships were to be dispersed by explosives, the canal entrance and the lock gates themselves would need extensive repairs. The entire operation on the night of May 26-27 took a little under five hours, and in it, despite the fierceness of the German bombing and machine-gunning, not one man concerned was even wounded.

CHAPTER IX

THE LESSON

"Walled towns, stored arsenals and armouries, goodly races of horses, chariots of war, elephants, ordnance, artillery and the like, all this is but a sheep in a lion's skin except the breed and disposition of the people be stout and warlike."

FRANCIS BACON.

GLORIOUS as the Battle of Flanders was in revealing the spirit of the new British Army, the audacity of the R.A.F., the sureness of the Navy's shield, and the loyalty of the civil population who risked their lives and spared no effort to help wherever and whenever they could, it is useless to attempt to disguise the magnitude of the reverses which we suffered. Mr. Churchill himself minced no words when he called it "a colossal military disaster," and there is no reason why any other commentator should mince his words.

The most humiliating thing about the success of the German tactics in their thrust to the coast was that they were principally based upon a weapon which we ourselves introduced in the last war. Tanks, masses and masses of tanks, were Hitler's weapon, and it was not a secret weapon because originally it was own own. Nor was it a weapon whose up-to-date use was unproven. The Spanish Civil War had shown how formidable close co-operation between air and land forces might be. The invasion of Poland, eight months before the invasion of the Low Countries, had not only hammered home the lesson of that co-operation, but proved that when tanks were part of the land forces the chaos and confusion which they could cause in working together with aeroplanes were tremendous.

Spain and Poland should have been the writing on the wall. When Hitler used his armoured divisions with such devastating results he was not as some people, so glibly assumed, employing a "new technique." He was only using, on a more massive scale, an idea which was

first put into operation in the last months of the Great War. General J. F. C. Fuller, who was then Chief of Staff of the Tank Corps, wrote in 1918 that it was "conclusively proved that low-flying aeroplanes could render the greatest assistance to tanks." In July a squadron of the R.A.F. was attached to the Tank Corps. The result of that co-operation was the "Black Day" of the German Army when their brigade headquarters was attacked far behind their lines.

Despite these warnings and portents, which went back over twenty years, the old ideas of sit-down defence and defence in depth still prevailed in the French Command. Virtually everything was staked on the Maginot Line.

Like a strongly flowing river which, finding its path blocked, turns aside to cut a new channel, the German Armies swept round the top of the great French protective system and poured in spate through the lands of least resistance. The theory, which was based neither on the latest experience nor on a common-sense view of the potentialities of the air-tank war revealed 22 years before, that this was certain to be another war where the opposing armies dug themselves in for years and only captured a few hundred yards now and then at the cost of thousands of lives, was so generally accepted that many people really believed the saying that "it would be safer in the trenches next time." The "inevitability of stagnation" was blown skyhigh almost overnight, when the Blitzkrieg started. This war became, and will remain, a war of movement. Leviathan is the new cavalry.

Let us examine in some closer detail the method of assault adopted by the German High Command. Each of the armoured divisions which they threw as spearheads against certain points in the Allied line, consisted of about 400 tanks. They were light, medium, and heavy, and each had its carefully allotted task. The lightest vehicles made lightning thrusts along roads, over fields, and even through woods, to draw the fire of the defenders, and having done so, to wait for the medium tanks to come up and deal with such of the defended posts as had revealed themselves.

The dilemma of the commanding officers at these posts was to know whether or not to show themselves. If they did so, then it was soon realized that they drew upon themselves the most unwelcome attentions, in a very short space of time, from the second line of tanks. If, on the other hand, they held their fire in order to concentrate on the succeeding waves of more heavily armoured vehicles, they ran the risk of letting the light tanks break right through to disorganize roads and railways by cutting down telegraph poles and other means, and the alternative risk that they themselves would be attacked from the rear. The part of the heaviest monsters was to come last, mopping up the country as they came, and dealing with the strongest, and possibly isolated defensive positions.

The only real answer to an offensive of this kind is, of course, to have at least as many tanks as the invader, otherwise he can afford to press his attacks home even though he loses a great many of his vehicles in doing so, because he knows he has plenty in hand. It has been calculated that in the Battle of Flanders the proportion of our armour to that of the Germans was about one in five or six. When that is borne in mind the gallantry and endurance of that rearguard action stands out in even greater prominence.

A great deal too much faith was placed in tank traps. Steel bars embedded in concrete, which naturally take a good deal of time to prepare, are about the only really effective obstacle, though concrete spikes intended to tear the tracks off are also useful. Ditches proved almost useless as a means of stopping the onslaught. The German Pioneer Service is undoubtedly a very effective one. Many of the tanks had special detachments of men whose job it was on approaching a ditch to jump out and either destroy it, by blasting it flat, or else to bridge it with planks or specially prepared bundles of wood. Naturally these men suffered considerable losses if there were any Allied machine-guns in the vicinity, but once again the sheer recklessness with which the Germans were prepared to use up their effectives stood them in good stead.

Rivers and canals, naturally, are more difficult to get across, and here the Germans relied largely upon the element of surprise, either appearing suddenly at bridges far away from where their main thrust seemed to be developing and which were therefore less heavily guarded, or, in some cases, ignoring the bridges altogether and concentrating on a place where a pontoon could be completed during the night. Their speed enabled them to do this, and so again did their preponderance in numbers.

If a section of tanks making one of these daring attacks was not successful, if indeed it was wiped out altogether, as happened on many occasions, the High Command simply wrote it off as lost, and tried once again somewhere else with reserves. But if they were successful in getting across in some unexpected place, their reconnaissance aircraft reported the fact with the least possible delay. The vanguard was followed up by great strength, and so diversions more than once were converted into main assaults.

* * * * *

Another conception of the way in which this war would develop, a conception which can be summed up in the frequently heard phrase "The war will be won in the air," must be readjusted. It would be much more accurate to say that it can be won *from* the air. For instance, it is now no longer necessary to prepare for a big push on land by an extremely wasteful and costly long range artillery barrage.

Instead, Air Forces act as artillery which is infinitely more mobile than any battery and much more likely to be accurate. A single bomber can do more damage in half an hour, as more than one lone British plane very effectively proved, than a dozen heavy batteries could do by pounding away for a week in the last war.

The Germans in the Battle of Flanders used the dive bomber very effectively to harass troops and as a component part of their advance by land. These were used fifty and sixty at a time, and in successive waves. The psychological effect of the noise they made and the way

they kept their attacks up hour after hour, was greater than the material damage they caused.

It seems as if we must relinquish the romantic notion of thousands of aircraft battling together in the sky at one time. Massed aircraft are very vulnerable. The few may take a very heavy toll of the many, as our fighters did time and time again. It is not mass used as mass that matters in the air. It is numbers that count, the power to fill up the gaps.

The air strategy of the Germans, therefore, would seem to be to avoid giving battle, in spite of having greater numbers, rather than to challenge it, because by avoiding it they keep their aeroplanes for bombing bases and troops, and possibly for occupying the opposing airfields.

Their fighters, though the latest models have certainly improved, are not of a quality to meet our fighters on equal terms. The intention with which they were built was rather to intercept opposing bombers, which they can usually, but not always, out-manceuvre. In the same way, their bombers, unlike the British, have not a strong enough armament to take on opposing fighters and get away without serious loss.

Moreover, it is certain that their losses in Flanders in first-class personnel were very serious. Goering still has, no doubt, thousands of young men who are willing to risk their lives if he tells them to, but they are not of the same standard as the pilots and gunners who were lost in Flanders. Dive bombing, for example, is, of all aerial operations the most nerve-racking, and it may well be that for the time being at any rate the German Air Force is not well enough trained, having had to call upon its reserves, to use this weapon as actively as it did in Flanders.

None the less, the amount of damage which bombers working in the field itself can do must inevitably be serious, and the only answer would seem to lie in counter-attack. Everything the enemy does must meet with reply and reprisal.

One of the complications of modern warfare is that refugees present a much greater problem than ever

before. That "dread Mississippi of humanity" as one war correspondent described it, was a constant embarrassment to our forces in Flanders. The speed of the German advance was such that their tanks were able to spread confusion in much the same way as cavalry used to do, but to a much larger degree. Roads were blocked with trucks and wagons and barrows, laden with possessions, and all of them going in the opposite direction to our troops. The delays which happened as a result were of great assistance to the enemy. Moreover, the deliberate machine-gunning of refugees was no haphazard cruelty, but part of a concerted plan to increase the chaotic conditions. These defenceless people, through no fault of their own, proved on more than one occasion, and especially when the German advance accelerated, to be Hitler's unwitting allies.

The activities of Fifth Columnists helped to aggravate the disorder in Flanders, but any tendency to overestimate their importance should be discouraged. Undoubtedly in Holland they played an important part, and it may even be an all-important part, in undermining resistance, but they depend for their value not on mere defeatists or even sympathisers with the opposite side, but on the existence of a body of traitors and spies of the most fanatical character, who are ready to take their lives in their hands in order to accomplish their fell purpose. If there had been in England at any time, as there was in Holland right up to the time of the invasion, a strong minority of active National-Socialists, then there might be cause for fearing a repetition, say, in London, of what happened in Rotterdam. But such is not the case. The energetic measures recently taken by Sir John Anderson, who, one imagines, would have liked to have got his way in this matter much earlier, are an assurance that those people who might themselves have taken a really active part on behalf of the enemy if he decides to try to invade this country, or whose organizations might have been used for the same purpose, have been removed to a place of safety. If we got to the point where we began to regard everything out of the ordinary as suspect, we should indirectly be

playing Hitler's game. The moral value of the Fifth Column, if he can establish it, is at least as great as the actual value.

At the same time any underestimate of the importance of the parachute trooper would be extremely foolish. When Soviet Russia first showed off this weapon at peace-time manoeuvres, the General Staffs of other nations were inclined to ridicule it. The Nazis, however, saw how it could be adapted to their own uses, and have employed it with increasing boldness and success.

If you disguise the men who are dropped in the uniforms of the other side, or as workmen, or clergymen, or women, or in any other disguise that suits your immediate purpose, not caring in the least if they are shot as spies, and certainly taking no heed for their safe recovery, you can do a great deal of damage. Once again, there is the advantage of a completely ruthless use of man-power. Adopting these methods really means employing spies on a larger scale and in a more dramatic way than they have ever been used before. It is a new conception of espionage in which the operator's life is in all probability a very short one, but in the time which fate or the vigilance of the defensive forces allows him he can do far more harm in a few hours than the old-fashioned secret agent did in months. He can guide bombers, blow up bridges and railway stations, and spread panic behind the lines. Once again, as we observed had happened on the field of battle itself, the Germans have speeded up the processes of warfare tremendously.

However, it would be unwise again to suppose that all enemy parachute troops will in future be dropped in disguise. Groups of them in Air-Force grey uniforms played a large part in the fight for Rotterdam and also in Flanders itself.

The experience of the past few months shows that the ingenuity of the German mind has been directed very closely to this new method of warfare, and it is to be hoped that nothing will stand in the way of the organization of a really effective counter-force in this country. The Local Defence Volunteers would seem to be an

excellent beginning, but it is essential that their functions should not be exaggerated. The principal defence against invaders, in whatever form they come, must be in the hands of fully trained and fully armed soldiers. Parachutists, as our troops found in Flanders, are often desperate men who are dangerous chiefly because they *are* desperate.

New methods emerge from the kind of concentrated study which the Nazis have devoted to the theory of modern warfare in the past few years, and which they are now putting into practice. At the same time, one of the chief lessons of the Battle of Flanders was that our ancient weapon and one in which we are yet supreme, is still vital. Without command of the sea the B.E.F. could never have been evacuated. It was significant that the German naval units which attempted to interfere were dealt with contemptuously, and with complete success. Moreover, the hundreds of bombers and fighters used by the enemy could not seriously hinder the movement or sink many ships even when they were lying at anchor and taking men off.

Finally, the balance of British sea losses and German air losses was overwhelmingly in our favour. It is no exaggeration to say that the failure of the much-vaunted German Air Arm to stop to any appreciable extent that difficult movement across the sea, was of first importance in considering the future of this war. There is no doubt that however large the forces, however relentlessly the attack is pursued, and however great the opportunities may be, air power finds it extremely difficult to interfere with sea power.

It is characteristic of the German mentality that at the height of their seeming success in Flanders they gleefully described our Army as being "driven into the sea." To a nation which has the largest and most powerful Navy in the world, to an island race whose power has been based in the past and in the present still lies in her command of blue water, such a phrase can have no meaning.

A nation and Empire which can look upon the shifting sea as its stronghold, whose young Army has proved its

steady and disciplined valour in the fire of hell itself, whose Air Force has matched Elizabethan daring with twentieth-century skill, do not admit the possibility of defeat. But if the victory which is certain in the end is not to be desperately long in coming, and the price of it tragically high, then there must be only one thought and one resolve, to give to the heroes of the Battle of Flanders as they fight on in fresh fields, a tank for a tank, a gun for a gun, a plane for a plane. Man is magnificent still, but without machines he cannot win the struggle against the powers of darkness. Herbert Morrison, Minister of Supply, has given three words to the nation for a battlecry. Upon the answer which is made to the simple adjunction depends the future of the world: Go to it!

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6^D
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1 1/6

JULYSIA

(PRONOUNCED JU-LISSY-ER)

TONIC HAIR CREAM